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## **The 'True Light which Enlightens Everyone' (John 1:9)**

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THE 'TRUE LIGHT WHICH  
ENLIGHTENS EVERYONE' (*JOHN* 1:9):  
JOHN, *GENESIS*, THE PLATONIC NOTION OF THE  
'TRUE, NOETIC LIGHT,' AND THE ALLEGORY OF  
THE CAVE IN PLATO'S *REPUBLIC*

GEORGE H. VAN KOOTEN

*Introduction*<sup>1</sup>

It has long been noted by scholars that the opening of the Prologue to John's Gospel runs parallel to the opening of *Genesis*. John's well-known statement that 'in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' (1:1) resembles and summarizes the choice of words in *Genesis*: 'In the beginning God made the heaven and the earth (...) and God said ...' (1:1–3a). This speaking of God is now rendered abstract and conceptualized as the activity of God's Word, his Logos. Plenty of attention has been paid to the Graeco-Roman background of this conceptualization. Generally, this concept of divine Logos has been understood as a Stoic notion, though it is in fact attested in ancient philosophy at large, whether in Stoic, Middle Platonist or other traditions.

However, the similarities between John's Prologue and the start of *Genesis* do not end here. Less well known, perhaps, is the fact that John also draws on what *Genesis* tells about the light, and this issue will be the central focus in this paper.<sup>2</sup> According to *Genesis*, 'God said: Let there be

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<sup>1</sup> I gratefully acknowledge and thank the participants of the TBN conference for their constructive criticism and suggestions, in particular Prof. J. Dillon, who suggested I should elaborate on the availability of Greek *paideia* to Jews, including those in Palestine. Furthermore, I profited much from the discussion of this paper with Prof. M. Frede (Oxford) in which he underlined the importance of the Platonic doctrine of the 'double Helios.' I am also very grateful for comments received at the 2003 British New Testament Conference at Birmingham, as well as for those made by Prof. R. Roukema (Kampen). I wish to thank Dr Maria Sherwood Smith (Leiden) for her corrections to the English of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> On the congruity of the light imagery of John's Prologue and the beginning of *Genesis*, see also M. Endo, *Creation and Christology: A Study on the Johannine Prologue in the Light of Early Jewish Creation Accounts* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen

light, and there was light. And God saw the light that it was good, and God divided between the light and the darkness' (1:3b-4). John, having dwelled for a moment on the creation by the divine Logos, continues by remarking that 'in this Logos was life, and that life was the light of mankind:' τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων. 'This light,' John continues, 'shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not seized it' (1:4-5).

What I shall argue in this paper is that John's interpretation of the opening of *Genesis* involves a particular Greek-philosophical understanding of light, which is as important for the understanding of his Gospel as is his notion of Logos. Maybe it reveals even more of the Graeco-Roman atmosphere in which the Gospel was written. In the first part of the paper I comment on John's view on light in his Prologue. In the second part I inquire into its function in the Gospel which follows. Together, these issues will show us the scope and content of John's interpretation of the light which God had created.

### 1. *The true light*

According to John, the light inherent in the divine Logos was the light of mankind: τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων. Soon he makes clear what he has in mind. The 'light of mankind,' which shines in the darkness, is paraphrased as 'the true light (τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν) which gives light to everyone' and which, at the Logos' incarnation, entered into the cosmos (1:9).

It is noteworthy that the light's own activities are presented in the present tense: the light *shines* in the darkness (1:5), the true light *enlightens* everyone (1:9). This is in marked contrast with other verb groups in the Gospel's Prologue, most of which are in the past tense, since the Prologue refers almost exclusively to the past time of creation, incarnation, and Jesus' earthly ministry. The verbs describing the light's activities are meaningful exceptions. Now, as before, ever since the world's creation, the light shines in the darkness. Now, as then, the true light gives light

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Testament [WUNT] II.149), Tübingen 2002, chap. 7.1.4, 217-219, esp. 219: 'As for the use of light imagery in the Johannine prologue, first of all, it reminds the readers of the event of the giving of light in the Genesis creation account'; and P. Borgen, 'Logos was the True Light: Contributions to the Interpretation of the Prologue of John,' *Novum Testamentum* 14 (1972) 115-130, esp. 117: 'the Prologue's basic structure (...) is an exposition of Gen. i 1ff.' This means that the light-darkness dualism is already part and parcel of John's use of the *Genesis* account.

to everyone. It did so already before the incarnation, the only difference being that at its incarnation the Logos-Light not only illuminated the world from without, but also entered and descended into it. But even after it has ascended again to the heavens, it still remains the true light which gives light to everyone, as it did before its descent into the world.

This will prove to be an important perspective for the readers of John's Gospel. Their present time is dominated by the presence of this all-embracing light. The difference between the time before and after the temporary dwelling of the Logos-Light on earth is not that the true light *began* to illuminate mankind, but that at least some people—the Johannine Christians—have now *become aware* of its existence and operation. Previously, mankind was ignorant of it. After the light's creation the darkness has not been able to seize it. John seems to be deliberately ambiguous here: the darkness did not grasp it, did not lay hold of it, nor did it grasp it with the mind; it did not comprehend it (1:5).

Generally speaking, this ignorance did not change after the temporary dwelling of the Logos-Light on earth. 'It was in the world; but the world, though it owed its being to it, did not recognize it,' John says (1:10). Despite the descent of the Logos-Light, even then the world at large did not recognize it, as it had not grasped it before. But apparently, Johannine Christianity is the exception. Its adherents have recognized that the true light gives light to everyone—not just to those who belong to the select group of the Johannine Christians, but to every human being. What makes a human being into a Johannine Christian is his recognition of the true light's radiation. But of what nature is this radiation? This question is not particularly difficult to answer, as the concept of true light is clearly defined in Graeco-Roman thought.

### 1.1. *The Greek conception of true light*

The concept of true light in John's Prologue can be traced back to Plato's *Phaedo*. In this dialogue, Socrates says:

If someone could reach to the summit, or put on wings and fly aloft, when he put up his head he would see the world above, just as fishes see our world when they put up their heads out of the sea. And if his nature were able to bear the sight, he would recognize that that is the true heaven and the true light (τὸ ἀληθινὸν φῶς) and the true earth

(*Phaedo* 109E).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> In this paper, passages from classical literature are quoted after the standard

This distinction between the earth which lies beneath the heavens, on the one hand, and the true earth and heaven and the true light, on the other, is the same distinction as Plato makes in the *Timaeus*. In the prelude to his account, Timaeus differentiates between the visible cosmos and the invisible paradigms after which God, its architect, constructed it. The cosmos has been constructed after the pattern of that which is apprehensible by reason and thought. This visible cosmos is in fact a copy (εἰκῶν) of an invisible paradigm (παράδειγμα) which underlies it (*Timaeus* 28C–29D).

This distinction between the paradigmatic reality and its visible copy is similar to that between the true heaven and the visible heaven, the true earth and the visible earth, and between the true light and the visible light. In his *Timaeus*, Plato does not comment on this true light; he speaks only of the fire that God lighted, the sun, to give light to the whole of the visible heaven (39B), in whose light all created animals are brought out (91D), and which interacts with the light which is inherent in the eye (45B–C; 46B).<sup>4</sup>

As we shall see in due course, it is in his *Republic* that Plato elaborates on the qualities of that light which, in his *Phaedo*, he calls ‘the true light.’ In the entire ensuing Platonic tradition, this true light, the ἀληθινὸν φῶς, is also known as the intellectual light, the νοερόν φῶς, or—alternatively—as the mental light, the νοητὸν φῶς, the light which falls in the province of νοῦς, as opposed to the visible, aesthetic light.<sup>5</sup> This Platonic tradition will now be examined in more detail, as against this background John’s assertion that Christ is the true light which gives light to everyone gains much relief.<sup>6</sup>

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English translations, most notably those available in the Loeb Classical Library series (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press) and, as far as Plato is concerned, E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (eds), *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, Princeton, New Jersey 1999<sup>17</sup>, with small modifications when necessary. Early patristic literature is quoted after the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* series (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark). The New Testament is normally quoted in the Revised English Bible translation.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. W. Beierwaltes, *Lux Intelligibilis: Untersuchung zur Lichtmetaphysik der Griechen* (Inaugural-Dissertation München), München 1957, 38–43.

<sup>5</sup> Although later, in Neoplatonic thought, e.g. in Hermias, *In Platonis Phaedrum scholia* 152, there is a differentiation between hypercosmic light, noeric light and noetic light; cf. Damascius, *De principiis* 1.81.

<sup>6</sup> The shared occurrence of ἀληθινὸν φῶς (‘the true light’) in *John* 1:9 and Plato’s *Phaedo* 109E seems to have gone unnoticed. Endo, for instance, in his recent study on the Johannine Prologue, is silent on the Platonic terminology of John’s light imagery and refers instead to Isaiah’s messianic light imagery. See Endo, *Creation and Christology*, chap. 7.2.1, 219–220; cf. chap. 8.2.3, 244–245. Peder Borgen equally neglects the

1.2. *The Platonic interpretation of the true light*

The first two authors which are particularly useful are Philo in the first half of the first century AD, and Clement of Alexandria at the end of the second, between whom—chronologically speaking—John is nicely positioned. As Philo and Clement are Jewish and Christian, respectively, we already get an impression how Jews and Christians could interpret the *Genesis* story in a Greek context.

a. *Philo of Alexandria*

In his interpretation of *Genesis*, Philo combined thoughts from both Plato's *Phaedo* and *Timaeus* (see also Dillon, this volume, §2). According

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Platonic background and accounts for the term ἀληθινὸν φῶς by establishing a sharp contrast in *John* 1:8–9 between Jesus as the true, genuine, actual light and John the Baptist as the supposed, preparatory light; see P. Borgen, 'The Gospel of John and Hellenism: Some Observations,' in: R.A. Culpepper and C.C. Black (eds), *Exploring the Gospel of John*, Louisville, Kentucky 1996, 115–130, esp. 122. The occurrence of ἀληθινὸν φῶς in Plato's *Phaedo* 109E is briefly mentioned in O. Schwankl, *Licht und Finsternis: Ein metaphorisches Paradigma in den johanneischen Schriften* (Herders Biblische Studien 5), Freiburg 1995, 67, but is not integrated into Schwankl's treatment of the 'true light' in *John* 1:9 on pages 131–133. The only exception to this scholarly neglect of the Platonic-philosophical background of the 'true light' seems to be C.H. Dodd, who draws parallels between this concept in John and similar concepts in Philo and the *Corpus Hermeticum*. See C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, Cambridge 1953, 34–35 and 50–51 (John and the *Corpus Hermeticum*, although still without references to the νοητὸν φῶς in *Corpus Hermeticum* 13.18 and the φῶς νοερόν in *Fragmenta varia* 23 [ed. A.D. Nock and A.J. Festugière 1954]), 55–56 and 203 (John and Philo), esp. 203 on John: 'His equivalent for Philo's φωτὸς ἀρχέτυπον is φῶς ἀληθινόν (1.9); both are speaking of the eternal "idea" of light, of which all empirical lights are transient copies.' Although Dodd does not refer to Plato's *Phaedo* 109E, he is well aware of the Platonic background to ἀληθινὸν φῶς in *John* 1:9, which he approaches from the angle of the epithet ἀληθινός: 'Ἀληθινός properly means "real" (...). Similarly, he (John) uses the term φῶς ἀληθινόν. We may then recall that Plato, in a passage which had immense influence on religious thought, offered the sun as a symbol or image of the ultimate reality, the Idea of Good, and in his allegory of the Cave suggested that as artificial light is to the light of the sun (which relative to it is αὐτὸ τὸ φῶς), so is the sun itself to the ultimate reality (*Rep.* 506D–517A). It was probably largely through the influence of Plato (...) that the conception of God Himself as the archetypal Light won currency in the religious world of Hellenism. (...) I do not suggest that the evangelist had direct acquaintance with the Platonic doctrine of Ideas; but there is ample evidence that in thoughtful religious circles at the time, and circles with which Johannine thought has demonstrable affinities, that doctrine had entered into the texture of thought. In any religious philosophy the conception of a κόσμος νοητός in some form or other was assumed—the conception of a world of invisible realities of which the visible world is a copy. It seems clear that the evangelist assumes a similar philosophy. His φῶς ἀληθινόν is the archetypal light, αὐτὸ τὸ φῶς, of which every visible light in this world is a μῆμα or symbol' (pp. 139–140).

to Philo in his writing *On the Creation* (29–36; 53), first the Maker made an incorporeal heaven (οὐρανὸς ἄσώματος), an invisible earth (γῆ ἀόρατος) and the incorporeal substance of light (ἄσώματος οὐσία φωτός). This light was an incorporeal and mental paradigm of the sun and of other heavenly luminaries: an ἄσώματον καὶ νοητὸν παράδειγμα. God says this light is beautiful for the very reason that, as a mental, intelligible light which is discernible by the mind, it surpasses the visible in the brilliancy of its radiance.

It is noteworthy that Philo already links up this concept of the intelligible light to the other important concept, that of Logos, as John does. According to John, in the Logos was life, and that life was the true light which gives light to everyone (1:4, 9). In Philo's view, too, the intelligible light is closely related to the Logos. The invisible, intelligible light came into being as an image (εἰκῶν) of the divine Logos. Together with the entire invisible cosmos, the invisible light can be said to have been firmly settled in the divine Logos (*On the Creation* 36). So the visible, aesthetic cosmos became ripe for birth after the paradigm of the incorporeal. Elsewhere, Philo stresses the fact that, whereas God is light and the archetype of every light, or rather, prior to and high above every archetype, holding the position of the paradigm of the paradigm, the Logos is indeed the paradigm which contained all God's fullness—light, in fact (*On Dreams* 1.75). Philo is apparently of the opinion that the 'Logos is light, for if God said "let there be light," this was a λόγος in the sense of a saying.'<sup>7</sup> Given this interpretation of *Genesis*, Philo can say that the Logos, spoken as it was when God ordered the creation of light, is itself light.

The same implication seems to be drawn in John. The Logos contains the light of mankind (1:4); it is the true light which gives light to everyone (1:9). Logos and light are closely connected. Elsewhere Philo draws the conclusion that if people are unable to see the intelligible light, they have to wander for ever as they will never be able to reach the divine λογισμός, the divine reasoning power (*On Providence* 2.19).

We now return to Philo's writing *On the Creation*, and note that he says that after the kindling of the mental light, which preceded the creation of the visible sun, darkness withdrew. Darkness withdrew as an immediate result of the creation of the intellectual light. This inference is also drawn by John. The true light contained in the Logos shines in

<sup>7</sup> F.H. Colson and G.H. Whitaker, *Philo in Ten Volumes*, vol. 5 (Loeb Classical Library), Cambridge, Massachusetts/London 1934, 337 note a.

the darkness, and the darkness has not seized it (1:5). As in Philo, this true light is not the visible light, but the intellectual light created as part of the incorporeal world before the birth of the visible world, which was about to occur after the paradigm of the incorporeal. The notion of the intellectual, true light which Philo and John use is firmly rooted in the Platonic differentiation between the intellectual and visible realms.

It is noteworthy, however, that Philo and John could hardly have experienced this notion as an unfamiliar, strange idea, as already the Septuagint offered an interpretation of *Genesis* which made it susceptible to Platonic ideas about the true, incorporeal light. It was the Septuagint which translated the very first words of *Genesis* as follows: 'In the beginning God made the heaven and the earth. But the earth was invisible and unformed:' ἡ δὲ γῆ ἦν ἀόρατος καὶ ἀκατασκεύαστος (1:1–2a). The notable difference from the Hebrew is that there the earth is not called 'invisible and unformed,' but *תהו ובהו* (*tohu wa-bohu*): formlessness and voidness (see also Noort, this volume, §1). The Greek phrase about the invisible earth in the beginning greatly encouraged an extensive Platonizing interpretation of the creation account in *Genesis* (see also Dillon, this volume, §2). In this way, Philo and John understood the light which was created in the beginning, when there was an invisible earth, as the true, intelligible light. Below, we will reflect on the relation between this intellectual light and the visible light of the sun, but for now we are concerned wholly with the mental type of light.<sup>8</sup>

#### b. *Clement of Alexandria*

The understanding of the first light as intellectual is also encountered in Clement's analysis of the *Genesis* story. His analysis is very interesting, as he compares Greek philosophy and the so-called 'Barbarian' philosophy of the Jewish-Christian tradition. In his *Stromateis*, he is eager to show that already the Barbarian philosophy is acquainted with Plato's differentiation between the noetic, intellectual world and the aesthetic world (5.14.93). The intellectual world is of course archetypal, whereas the visible world is the image, the material representation of the immaterial paradigm. Clement too combines Plato's *Timaeus* and *Phaedo*, when he says that this paradigmatic reality consists of the

<sup>8</sup> For a fuller comparison between Philo and John, see D.T. Runia, *Philo in Early Christian Literature: A Survey* (Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum 3.3), Assen & Minneapolis 1993, chap. 4.4, 78–83.



invisible heaven, the sacred earth, and the intellectual light.<sup>9</sup> Clement renders the verbal similarity with the Septuagint explicit, as he subsequently points out the correspondence between Plato and Barbarian philosophy by referring to the lines quoted above from *Genesis*: ‘For “in the beginning,” it is said, “God made the heaven and the earth; and the earth was invisible.” And it is added, “And God said, Let there be light; and there was light.”’

The creation of this reality is different from the subsequent formation of visible variety. According to Clement, ‘in the aesthetic cosmogony God creates a solid heaven (and what is solid is capable of being perceived by sense), and a visible earth, and a light that is seen.’ In this way, Clement demonstrates the congruity between Plato and Moses.<sup>10</sup> It is clear that the Septuagint text with its notion of an invisible earth at the beginning gave rise to Clement’s Platonic interpretation of the first light as an intellectual light. In his Jewish-Christian tradition, he shares this understanding with Philo and John.

c. *God as the true light*

It is quite extraordinary, but we even seem to have some Graeco-Roman testimony to the Jewish-Christian speculation of God being concerned with the intellectual light. According to the Roman scholar Varro, who lived just before Philo, the Chaldeans in their mysteries call the God of the Jews Ἰάω (Varro, frg. 17; ed. Cardauns), which according to Herennius Philo of Byblos (c. AD 70–160) is Phoenician for the noetic light (*FGrH* 790 frg. 7).<sup>11</sup> Apparently, also among Greeks

<sup>9</sup> Cf., with explicit reference to Plato’s *Phaedo*, Origen, *Against Celsus* 7.31. Having referred to Celsus’ explanation of the true heaven and the true light in Plato’s *Phaedo* (109E), Origen says: ‘The very ancient doctrine of Moses and the prophets is aware that the true things all have the same name as the earthly things which are more generally given these names. For example, there is a “true light”, and a “heaven” which is different from the firmament, and “the sun of righteousness” is different from the sun perceived by the senses’ (transl. H. Chadwick, *Origen: ‘Contra Celsum’*, Cambridge 1953).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 5.5.29, ‘Pythagoras and his followers, with Plato also, and most of the other philosophers, were best acquainted with the Lawgiver, as may be concluded from their doctrine. (...) Whence the Hellenic philosophy is like the torch of wick which men kindle, artificially stealing the light from the sun. But on the proclamation of the Word all that holy light shone forth. Then in houses by night the stolen light is useful; but by day the fire blazes, and all the night is illuminated by such a sun of intellectual light.’

<sup>11</sup> Lydus, *De mensibus* 4.53: ὁ δὲ Ῥωμαῖος Βάρρων περὶ αὐτοῦ διαλαβὼν φησι παρὰ Χαλδαίοις ἐν τοῖς μυστικοῖς αὐτὸν λέγεσθαι Ἰάω ἀντὶ τοῦ φῶς νοητὸν τῇ Φοινίκων γλώσσῃ, ὥς φησιν Ἑρέννιος; see B. Cardauns, *M. Terentius Varro Antiquitates Rerum Divinarum*,

there was speculation about the Jewish God's identity with the noetic, intellectual light. It seems reasonable to surmise that this has to do with the Septuagint's rendering of the creation story.

Particular Greek gods were also associated with the true, intellectual light. There is a hint in Plutarch that Osiris was understood as a conceptual light (*Isis and Osiris* 382C). According to Plutarch, the robe of Osiris has only one single colour like the light, because that which is primary and conceptual (τὸ πρῶτον καὶ νοητόν) is without admixture (*Isis and Osiris* 382C). In this, Osiris differs from Isis whose robes are variegated in their colours, since her power is not concerned with the conceptual, but with matter. Furthermore, Aelius Aristides, commenting on the Temple of Asclepius in Pergamum, regards Asclepius as the true light, saying: 'here in Asia was founded the hearth of Asclepius, and here friendly beacons are raised for all mankind by the god who calls men to him and holds aloft an ἀληθινὸν φῶς, a true light indeed' (*Orations* 23.15). That is no inordinate appraisal, as he portrays Asclepius as he who guides and directs the universe, saviour of the whole and guardian of what is immortal (*Orations* 42.4). Finally, Helios is characterized by Vettius Valens not only as a fiery commander, as one would expect, but also as an intellectual light: φῶς νοερόν (*Anthologiarum* 1.4). These examples show that specific gods were identified with the true, intellectual light.<sup>12</sup>

### 1.3. *Enlightening every man*

Now the Platonic background of John's true light has been established, it is time to have a closer look at its description in John as the true light which enlightens every man. This further characterization also makes much sense in a Platonic context. Although Plato's digression on the intellectual light in his *Republic* will be discussed in detail below, let me already draw attention in passing to Plato's explicit statement that the

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vol. 1: *Die Fragmente* (Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur; Abhandlungen der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse), Mainz & Wiesbaden 1976, 22, frg. 17; cf. Cardauns' commentary in vol. 2: *Kommentar*, 146.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. also the polemic about Jupiter and Christ in Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* 10.98: '... the great Artist and Father has formed us, such a living image as man is. But your Olympian Jove, the image of an image, greatly out of harmony with truth, is the senseless work of Attic hands. For the image of God is his Word, the genuine Son of Mind, the divine Word, the archetypal light of light'.

prisoners in the cave should turn upward the vision of their souls and fix their gaze on that which sheds light on *all* (*Republic* 540A).

This depiction of the universal and unlimited radius of the noetic light shedding its light on all is frequently repeated in ancient philosophy. It will suffice for now to point to Epictetus and Iamblichus. Iamblichus stresses that the one and indivisible light of the gods is present, in an indivisible way, to *all those who are able to participate in it* (*On the Egyptian Mysteries* 1.9; 31.11–14). According to Epictetus, it is a shame that man honours Triptolemus, the one who taught the arts of agriculture to the nations, but tends to be negligent in service to God who acts as the true light:

To Triptolemus, indeed, all men have established shrines and altars, because he gave us as food the fruits of cultivation, but to him who has discovered, and brought to light, and imparted to *all men* the truth which deals, not with mere life, but with a good life, —who among you has for that set up an altar in his honour, or dedicated a temple or a statue, or bows down to God in gratitude for him? (*Discourses* 1.4.31).

Epictetus characterizes God as he who has brought to light the real truth, and imparted it to *all men*.

This passage is particularly relevant as Epictetus not only stresses the universal scope of God's activity, but also employs the same verb as John: φωτίζειν ('to bring to light'). God has brought to light the real truth. This verb is not attested for the pre-Hellenistic period and is very much in vogue during the Empire to designate spiritual enlightenment.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Alcinoos in his *Handbook of Platonism*, in a discussion about how we can conceive God, describes God's primal intellect as that which provides intellection to the power of intellection in the soul and intelligibility to its objects, by illuminating (φωτίζων) the truth contained in them (10.5; 165.23–26). God's activity of spiritual enlightenment is spoken of in terms of φωτίζειν, just as the true light in John is said to *enlighten* every man (1:9).<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> See J. Whittaker (intro., text, and comm.), *Alcinoos: Enseignement des doctrines de Platon* (Collection des Universités de France; L'Association Guillaume Budé), Paris 1990, 24 and 107 note 206. English transl.: J. Dillon (transl., intro., and comm.), *Alcinoos: The Handbook of Platonism*, Oxford 1993.

<sup>14</sup> In his commentary on this passage, Whittaker links this passage from Alcinoos to the one we have just quoted from Epictetus, but he also mentions *John* 1:9, the very text under discussion here (Whittaker, *Alcinoos*, 107 note 206). I leave aside the question whether *John* 1:9 should be translated as 'The true light which enlightens everyone was coming into the world' or, alternatively, as 'He (= the Logos) was the true light which

1.4. *The true light and the soul: how does it work?*

The Platonic concept of the true light should now be sufficiently clear. But how was it supposed to work? How was the true light thought to relate to mankind? It enlightens every man, but how did it actually fulfil its role of light of mankind? We have already looked briefly at the spiritual meaning of the verb φωτίζειν, but now a closer look will be taken at its proper function. Let us take another brief preview at Plato's parable of the cave in book VII of his *Republic*.

According to Plato, it is a matter of true philosophy when the prisoners are released from their subterranean cave with its shadows cast from the light of a fire, and ascend to the true light outside the cave. Although there would be some need for habituation, finally these prisoners would be able to look at the sun, i.e. they attain to the vision of the good; it is the good in the *intelligible* world which is the authentic source of truth and reason (*Republic* 514A–520D). As Plato had already explained earlier in his well-known Sun simile in book VI of his *Republic*, 'As the good is in the intelligible region to reason and the objects of reason, so is this (the sun) in the visible world to vision and the objects of vision' (*Republic*, book VI, 508B–C).

In Plato's *Republic* it is the task of true philosophy to release man from his bondage in the cave so that he may ascend to the true, intellectual light. This idea was widely received. Clement, for instance, warns his readers, whom he calls the 'sons of the true light' (οἱ τοῦ φωτός τοῦ ἀληθινοῦ υἱοὶ), not to close the door against this light, but to turn in on themselves, illuminating the eyes of the hidden man, and gazing on the truth itself (*Paedagogus* 2.9.80). This is very similar to what one reads in Plotinus' *Enneads*. In a passage on inner vision, Plotinus, in turn, encourages his readers to withdraw into themselves and look, and to

bring light to all that is overcast, (...) until there shall shine out on you from it the godlike splendour of virtue (...). When you know that you have become this perfect work, when you are self-gathered in the purity of your being, nothing now remaining that can shatter that inner

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enlightens everyone who comes into the world.' If the latter were correct, it would be notable that in the ancient world birth is very often explicitly described as 'the journey out of darkness into the light of the sun' (so Plutarch, frg. 157); see further Philo, *On the Special Laws* 3.119 on 'babes, who have just passed into the light and the life of human kind'; Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris* 355E on the birth of Osiris: 'The Lord of All advances to the light'; and Plato, *Protagoras* 320D and 321C; *Timaeus* 91D. My preference goes out to the first translation, which describes the light's descent into the world. This descent is already supposed to have been accomplished in *John* 1:10: It was *in* the cosmos.

unity, nothing from without clinging to the authentic man, when you find yourself wholly true to your essential nature, wholly that only φῶς ἀληθινόν, that only true light (...)—when you perceive that you have grown to this, you are now become very vision (Enneads 1.6.9).<sup>15</sup>

The same concern for man's unification with the true, intellectual light is exhibited in another treatise on the Good, or the One. In it Plotinus says that not here, but there, in the heavens, the soul may unite with its veritable love, God,

not holding it in some fleshly embrace (...). (...) the soul takes another life as it draws nearer and nearer to God and gains participation in Him; thus restored it feels that the dispenser of true life is there to see (...). Thus we have all the vision that may be of Him and of ourselves; but it is of a self wrought to splendour, brimmed with the intellectual light (φωτὸς πλήρη νοητοῦ), become that very light, pure (...), raised to Godhood or, better, knowing its Godhood (Enneads 6.9.9; transl. S. MacKenna).

Such passages from Clement and Plotinus show that the Platonic concept of the true, intellectual light had clear educational connotations which aim at the edification of the soul. In this visible world, man is to find his way back to the true light. The rays of this light, Philo says, are visible to the mind only, pure from all defiling mixture and piercing to the furthest distance, flashing upon the eyes of the soul (*On Drunkenness* 44). This notion of eyes of the soul is also Platonic and widespread in ancient philosophy.<sup>16</sup> Two further examples may suffice at present.

(a) Already during their lives, according to Alcinous, the philosophical souls

had longed for knowledge and had preferred the pursuit of it to any other thing, as being something by virtue of which, when they had purified and rekindled, as it were, 'the eye of the soul' (Plato, *Republic*, book VII, 533D), after it had been destroyed and blinded (...), they would become capable of grasping the nature of all that is rational (Handbook of Platonism 27.3; 180.22–28 [transl. J. Dillon]).

(b) According to Philo, the divine light opens wide the soul's eye (*On the Migration of Abraham* 39). Along these lines, Philo can say that there is abiding in the soul that most God-like and incorporeal light (*On Dreams*

<sup>15</sup> Translation, with small modifications, taken from S. MacKenna, *Plotinus: The Enneads*, London 1962<sup>3</sup> (Third edition revised by B.S. Page).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Beierwaltes, *Lux Intelligibilis*, 66–68; and, on the development towards Plato, J. Bremmer, *The Early Greek Concept of the Soul*, Princeton, New Jersey 1983, 40–41.

1.113). God shines around the soul, and the light of the intellectual light fills it through and through, so that indeed the shadows are driven from it by the rays which pour all around it (*On Abraham* 119). Consequently, when God, the spiritual sun, rises and shines upon the soul, the gloomy night of passions and vices is scattered (*On the Virtues* 164). For that reason, Philo reports, the Jewish Therapeutae pray at sunrise for a fine bright day, fine and bright in the true sense of the heavenly daylight which they pray may fill their minds (*On the Contemplative Life* 27).

The alternative for this philosophical life-style, as Philo makes quite clear, is darkness. In a passage which resembles John's Gospel very closely, Philo says that those who betray the honour due to the One 'have chosen darkness in preference to the brightest light and blind-folded the mind which had the power of keen vision' (*On the Special Laws* 1.54). This is very similar to Jesus' statement in his dialogue with Nicodemus to the effect that the light has come into the world, but that people preferred darkness to light (*John* 3:19–21). The wording also occurs in Plutarch's curious remarks on the Egyptians, who are said to have deified the field-mouse because of its blindness, since they regarded darkness as superior to light (*Table-talk* 670B). These passages clearly suggest that the road to spiritual enlightenment is not chosen automatically. Elsewhere Philo writes that some people continue to wander for ever and are never able to reach the divine reasoning power, because they are unable to see the νοητὸν φῶς, the intellectual light: the bad have lost the use of their mind, over which folly has shed profound darkness (*On Providence* 2.19). This is in marked contrast with what Philo says about others, in whose soul there is abiding that most God-like and incorporeal light (*On Dreams* 1.113).

A similar contrast between light and darkness can be found in Plutarch's polemics against the Epicureans who prefer to 'live unknown.' In Plutarch's view this lifestyle runs contrary to man's real nature. Plutarch demonstrates this by explaining the etymology of the word 'man' (φῶς) from the word 'light' (φῶς). According to him, 'some philosophers believe that the soul itself is in its substance light'. For that reason the Epicurean predilection for 'living unknown' amounts to a life turned away from the light, the life of those who cast themselves into the unknown state and wrap themselves in darkness and bury their life in an empty tomb. This life very much resembles the life of those who have lived a life of impiety and crime and whose souls are eventually thrust into a pit of darkness (*Is 'Live Unknown' a Wise Precept?* 1130A–D).

This lifestyle conflicts with man's true destiny because, as Plutarch says elsewhere, 'the soul within the body is a light and the part of it that comprehends and thinks should be ever open and clear-sighted, and should never be closed nor remain unseen' (*The Roman Questions* 281). These words constitute what one might call a Platonic educational programme: the soul should be ever open to the true light that enlightens everyone. As we shall see, this is exactly the programme of John, too.

## 2. *The concept applied in the body of John's Gospel after the Prologue*

The conception of the true light in John's Prologue has been set against its background in Greek-philosophical thought. Now its function in the rest of the Gospel will be traced by focussing on those passages in which it reoccurs. We shall see that in two important, extensive passages John demonstrates his understanding of Christ as the true light. These passages are located in the centre of the Gospel and constitute the climax of John's reflection on this matter. But even before that there are two passages which call for attention.

### 2.1. *Nathanael and Jesus' power of television*

Right at the beginning of the Gospel, after the Prologue, there is a peculiar story about Jesus making the acquaintance of his prospective disciples Andrew, Peter, and Philip. The latter then goes to Nathanael and exhorts him to join Jesus, too. As soon as Nathanael comes to Jesus, Jesus hails him as an Israelite worthy of the name, in whom there is nothing false. When Nathanael is slightly embarrassed and asks Jesus how he can know this, Jesus replies: 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip spoke to you.' At this demonstration of Jesus' apparent power of television, Nathanael converts to Jesus (1:43-49). Curious as this story may be, within the context of John's conception of the true light it becomes less cryptic. Jesus, as the divine and true, intellectual light is in no need of visible light to see clearly. That God does not demand normal daylight for his vision because he is the true light is repeatedly stressed in Philo's writings.

According to Philo, it is mistaken to assume that God 'sees nothing but the outer world through the co-operation of the sun.' As a matter of fact, God

surveys the unseen even before the seen, for he himself is his own light. For the eye of the Absolutely Existent needs no other light to effect perception, but he himself is the archetypal essence of which myriads of rays are the effluence, none aesthetic, but all intellectual

(*On the Cherubim* 96–97).

For that reason, to God all things are known; he sees all things distinctly, by clearest light, even by himself (*On Flight and Finding* 136).<sup>17</sup> If this is taken into account, it become clear that in John's Gospel Jesus' power of television arises from his role of true, archetypal, intellectual light.

## 2.2. *Nicodemus*

Slightly later in the Gospel, the true light is spoken of explicitly for the first time since its mention in the Prologue. In his discourse with Nicodemus, Jesus talks about the light's descent into the world, and remarks that most people prefer darkness to light, but those who live by the truth come to the light. As we have already noted, this dichotomy between those who take heed of the true light and those who do not is an integral part of Greek philosophical theory about the true light and people's attitudes to it (see section I.4).

The right attitude of mind towards the true light is subsequently demonstrated at the centre of the Gospel, in two extensive healing stories which constitute the climax of John's reflection on the true light. One is concerned with the healing of a blind man, the other with the raising of Lazarus, and neither is paralleled in the Synoptic gospels. They demonstrate the *modus operandi* of the true light.

## 2.3. *The healing of the blind man*

The overall theme of the two healing stories under consideration is introduced immediately previously by Jesus' statement during his public teaching in Jerusalem that he is 'the light of the world. No follower of mine shall walk in darkness; he shall have the light of life' (8:12). The meaning of this programme is immediately demonstrated, as—after his speech—Jesus sees a man who has been blind from birth. Because this blind man will be shown to be the prototype of everyone who comes

<sup>17</sup> Cf. further Philo, *On the Unchangeableness of God* 58–59; and *On the Special Laws* 1.278–279.



to see the true light, it is no coincidence that he is called 'blind from birth:' τυφλὸς ἐκ γενετῆς (9:1).

This characterization seems to be a reminder of the distinction drawn in the Gospel's Prologue (1:1–18) between being born of God (ἐκ θεοῦ γεννηθῆναι) and being born of human stock, by the physical desire of a human father (1:12–13)—a distinction which, in the dialogue with Nicodemus, is also cast as that between being born from above (γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν) and being born from flesh (ἐκ τῆς σαρκὸς γεννηθῆναι; 3:3–8). Those who become children of God are born from God (1:12–13) and are no longer born from flesh, or in terms of the healing of the blind man: they are no longer born blind (9:2, 19, 20, 32). It is very probable then, that the blind man is in fact the prototype of those who become children of God.<sup>18</sup>

When Jesus sees the blind man after his speech in which he has declared himself the light of the world (8:12), Jesus repeats this self-designation. According to John, Jesus says:

While I am in the world I am the light of the world. With these words he spat on the ground and made a paste with the spittle; he spread it on the man's eyes, and said to him, 'Go and wash in the pool of Siloam.' (...) The man went off and washed, and came back able to see (9:5–7).

What has been said previously at the beginning of the Gospel, in a private dialogue with Nicodemus at night, is now publicly proclaimed by Jesus in Jerusalem straight after the great autumnal festival of Tabernacles (cf. 7:2).

There are two things particularly noteworthy about this healing. First of all, although Jesus is the true, intellectual light and has just spoken of himself as the light of the world, this story clearly states that the normal vision of the blind man was restored so that he could see the physical light; he came back able to see. Only on closer scrutiny is this story revealed to be about the restoration of spiritual vision.<sup>19</sup> It is not just about inserting vision into blind eyes. At first hand, however,

<sup>18</sup> This link between 'blind from birth' and 'having never beheld the true light' is also made explicitly in the exposition of the system of the Naassenes in Hippolytus, *The Refutation of All Heresies* 5.9.19: 'But if any one, he (the Naassene) says, is blind from birth, and has never beheld the true light, "which lighteneth every man that cometh into the world", by us let him recover his sight'.

<sup>19</sup> Otherwise, this story would have been identical with Dio Cassius' story about the healing of a blind man by Vespasian in Alexandria in AD 70: 'Vespasian himself healed two persons, one having a withered hand, the other being blind, who had come to him because of a vision seen in dreams; he cured the one by stepping on his hand and the

Jesus, the world's *true* light, imparts *physical* light to the eyes of the blind man. This presupposes some continuity between true, intellectual light and normal physical light. That seems indeed to be the case and becomes understandable if Greek philosophical thought on this matter is taken into account. According to ancient philosophers, the continuity between true, intellectual light and physical light is not just a metaphor.

(a) According to Philo, the incorporeal and intellectual light is in fact the paradigm of the sun and of all luminaries. The invisible, intellectual light is a supercelestial constellation and at the same time the source of the constellations obvious to the senses (*On the Creation* 29–31). As a matter of fact, God, as the archetype on which laws are modelled, is the sun of the sun; he is 'the noetic of the aesthetic:' he is in the intellectual realm that which the sun is in the perceptible realm, and from invisible fountains he supplies the visible beams to the sun which our eyes behold (*On the Special Laws* 1.279).

(b) In a similar way, Plutarch is of the opinion that one must not believe that the sun is merely an image (εἰκῶν) of Jupiter, but that the sun is really Jupiter himself ἐν ὕλῃ, in his material form (*The Roman Questions* 282C).

(c) The continuity between intellectual and physical light is also stressed by Vettius Valens who calls Helios a fiery commander as well as an intellectual light: φωὶς νοερόν (*Anthologiarum* 1.4).

(d) Likewise, throughout his *Hymn to King Helios* Julian makes clear that Helios, the sun, enlightens both the intellectual and physical reality: 'For just as through his light he gives sight to our eyes, so also among the intelligible gods through his intellectual counterpart (...) he bestows on all the intellectual gods the faculty of thought and of being comprehended by thought' (145B). At the same time Helios possesses intellectual functions and a visible creative function (145D).<sup>20</sup>

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other by spitting upon his eyes' (Dio Cassius 65.8.1–2; transl. E. Cary); these miracles were interpreted as a sign that 'Heaven was thus magnifying him.'

<sup>20</sup> On the dual function of Helios, see also W. Fauth, *Helios Megistos: Zur synkretistischen Theologie der Spätantike* (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 125), Leiden 1995, xxxi, with reference to *Corpus Hermeticum* 16.17–18: '(Helios) bildet (...) das demiurgische Bindeglied zwischen intelligibler Welt (κόσμος νοητός) und sinnlich wahrnehmbarer Welt (κόσμος αἰσθητός), transportiert das Gute (τὸ ἀγαθόν) von oben nach unten, wobei er selbst gemäß dieser Kommunikation Mittelpunkt der kosmischen Sphären, der Kosmos hingegen das Werkzeug seiner demiurgischen Aktivität ist'; and 135–137, with reference to Proclus. For a detailed commentary of Proclus' *Hymn to Helios*, in which Helios is addressed as 'king of νοερόν φωὶς (*Hymn* 1.1),' 'king of noeric fire,' see R.M.

(e) All four examples seem to be a reflection of Plato's statement, in book VII of his *Republic*, that the idea of good 'is indeed the cause for all things of all that is right and beautiful, giving birth in the *visible* world to light and the sun ("and its lord"), and its own power in the *intelligible* world producing truth and reason' (517B–C).<sup>21</sup> Against this background,<sup>22</sup> one can more easily discern why in John's Gospel Christ, the true, intellectual light, can at the same time impart physical light to the eyes of the blind man; the true light is simultaneously the physical light of this world.

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van den Berg, *Proclus' Hymns: Essays, Translations, Commentary* (Philosophia Antiqua 90), Leiden 2001, 153: 'the sun is characterized by a double procession from the Demiurgic Nous. In its humbler manifestation it is just one of the heavenly bodies. According to (Proclus' interpretation of) *Ti[maeus]* 39B4, however, the Demiurge himself gave the sun its light "not from a material substrate, but from himself." Hence it is also called "noeric light" (νοερὸν φῶς [...]). This light does two things: on the one hand it creates order and harmony in the universe (...); on the other hand it elevates all things to the Demiurgic Nous.'

<sup>21</sup> See also Plato's allegory of the sun in his *Republic* 507B–509C. Cf. Beierwaltes, *Lux Intelligibilis*, 37–57, esp. 51–52 on the similarity between the idea of good and the sun: 'Sonne und ἀγαθόν sind zwar voneinander verschieden, trotzdem besteht eine Übereinstimmung. Beide stimmen nicht nur darin überein, daß sie Ordnungs- und Lebensprinzip sind, sondern daß sie auch von Wesen Licht sind. Die Sonne spendet das Licht, damit der Gesichtssinn die Gegenstände des Sehens wahrnehmen kann. Das ἀγαθόν gibt den Dingen die Wahrheit (508E), daß sie erkannt werden können. Im ersten und im zweiten Bereich macht das Licht die Dinge sichtbar und einsehbar. Im ersten ist es das sinnliche Licht, im zweiten das intelligible. Das intelligible Licht ist dem sinnlichen logisch und ontologisch vorgeordnet.'

<sup>22</sup> See further Philo, *On the Creation* 55: 'It was with a view to that original intellectual light, which I have mentioned as belonging to the order of the incorporeal world, that He created the heavenly bodies of which our senses are aware'; *On the Migration of Abraham* 40: 'Wisdom is God's archetypal luminary and the sun is a copy and image of it.' Note also Hermias of Alexandria, *In Platonis Phaedrum scholia* 177 on the 'double Helios': 'Überall sagt Platon, daß der Herrscher Helios in Analogie zum ersten Prinzip steht. Wie nämlich hier die Sonne Herrscher über den ganzen wahrnehmbaren Kosmos ist, so ist es über den noetischen jener. Und wie von dem Herrscher Sonne Licht hinabgebracht wird, welches das Sehfähige mit dem Sichtbaren verbindet, verknüpft und eint, auf dieselbe Weise verknüpft auch das Licht, das aus dem ersten Gott hervorgeht—er nennt es "Wahrheit"—, den Nous mit dem Noetischen. Man kann also sehen, daß die Schönheit dies nachahmt. Denn sie ist gleichsam ein Licht, das ausgesendet wird von der Quelle des Noetischen hin zum irdischen Kosmos' (H. Bernard [transl. and intro.], *Hermias von Alexandrien: Kommentar zu Platons 'Phaidros'* [Philosophische Untersuchungen 1], Tübingen 1997; cf. *In Platonis Phaedrum scholia* 179). On the issue of the dual function of the sun in relation to Christ as the 'true sun,' see M. Wallraff, *Christus Verus Sol: Sonnenverehrung und Christentum in der Spätantike* (Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum; Ergänzungsband 32 [2001]), Münster 2001, Index, s.v. 'Doppelte Sonne' and 'Geistige Sonne.'

Secondly, it is indeed noteworthy that this healing story is not just about physical light and physical vision. As we already surmised, the blind man functions as the prototype of those who come to be born from God, born from on high, and who thus receive spiritual enlightenment. This is not only implicit in Jesus' dual identity as the light of the world, but is also rendered explicit in Jesus' remark that he has come into this world, to give sight to the sightless, but to make blind those who claim to see (9:39–40). This confirms our impression that the healing of the blind man is in fact a prototypical example of spiritual enlightenment. Soon this illustration of the true light's activity is followed by another healing story which features another prototype, who is not merely healed from blindness but is even raised from his grave in a cave.

#### 2.4. *Lazarus*

The prototype who figures in the other healing story is Lazarus. In many respects, Lazarus is an even more powerful exemplar of life turned towards the true light than is the blind man, as he is first raised from the dead and then regains his power of sight when a cloth, wrapped around his face, is finally removed. According to John, Jesus was informed early on of the serious illness of his friend Lazarus, yet deliberately delayed his visit to him, so that he would indeed die. Jesus explains his delay by stating: 'Anyone can walk in the daytime without stumbling, because he has this world's light to see by. But if he walks after nightfall he stumbles, because the light fails him' (11:9–10).

The point Jesus apparently wants to demonstrate is that because he—the light of the world—is away from Lazarus, Lazarus is short of this light and stumbles to his death. This is what Jesus wants to make evident to the people, and for that reason, for their sake, he is even glad that he was not there (11:15). Only after Lazarus' death and funeral does Jesus arrive. The correct understanding of the whole situation, however, is about to dawn for those among the crowd who had already experienced Jesus' healing of the blind man. They ask themselves: 'Could not this man, who opened the blind man's eyes, have done something to keep Lazarus from dying?' (11:37)

The answer to this question is given by Jesus, who goes to the tomb, which is in a cave—as John explicitly says—and orders Lazarus to come out. In response, 'the dead man came out, his hand and feet bound with linen bandages, his face (ὄψις) wrapped in a cloth. And

Jesus said, “Release him; let him go:” λύσατε αὐτὸν καὶ ἄφετε αὐτὸν ὑπάγειν (11:38–44). Impressed by this event, many come to believe in Jesus, though the authorities now reach their definitive decision to kill Jesus and ‘to do away with Lazarus as well, since on his account many Jews were going over to Jesus’ (11:45–53; 12:9–11).

The prototypical value of this story of the raising of Lazarus springs to mind very easily. Again John applies the concept of true light, and this time there appear to be notable parallels with Plato’s parable of the cave. This seems no coincidence, since after all John’s Prologue had already explicitly introduced Jesus as the true light. This concept is derived from Plato’s *Phaedo*, but is worked out in full in book VII of his *Republic*, in the well-known parable of the prisoners in the cave, who are gradually introduced to the real light of the sun outside the cave.

## 2.5. *Plato, Greek education, and the Jews*

Before I come to making a case for the correspondences between Plato’s allegory of the cave and John’s story of how Lazarus was raised from a cave by Jesus, the true light, it seems imperative above all to outline how John could have known Plato. The degree to which John, in his portrayal of Jesus, seems to be familiar with Plato’s thought cannot be explained satisfactorily by a vague reference to a *Zeitgeist* in which such notions were general currency. Rather, such knowledge hints at familiarity with particular Platonic notions through some form of education (*paideia*).

John’s acquaintance with Plato could be the result of formal, institutionalized education, but that is not necessary, as a whole range of formal and informal training and teaching in Greek language, culture, and philosophy was available throughout the Mediterranean world.<sup>23</sup> Jews had access to it, too. That they even had knowledge of Plato is clear from explicit references to him by Jews such as Aristobulus, Philo of Alexandria, Josephus, and Justus of Tiberias.

According to Aristobulus, who probably lived in Alexandria in the second century BC, Plato imitated Jewish law, which was available to him in a partial Greek translation predating the Septuagint; the philosopher had worked through each of the details contained in it,

<sup>23</sup> On the ubiquity of *paideia* in the Hellenistic and Roman worlds, see T. Morgan, *Literate Education in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds*, Cambridge 1998, 3, 21–25.

and had taken many things from it (Aristobulus, frg. 4). Aristobulus is convinced that

since Pythagoras, Socrates, and Plato investigated everything thoroughly, they seem (...) to have followed him (Moses) in saying that they hear God's voice by reflecting on the cosmic order as something carefully created by God and permanently held together by him (frg. 4).<sup>24</sup>

This conviction about Plato's dependence on the Jewish Scriptures, which—as we shall see—was shared by Josephus, could certainly enhance a favourable attitude towards Plato among Jews. Such congeniality is found in Philo's writings in the first half of the first century AD. In his work *On the Creation*, Philo refers to Plato with approval: '..., as Plato says, ...' (119: ὡς ἔφη Πλάτων; cf. 133). Furthermore, he refers explicitly to Plato's *Timaeus* (*On the Eternity of the World* 13; 25; 141) and seems to side with Plato in his view of the indestructibility of the cosmos (13–17; 27). He pays Plato a compliment when introducing a quotation from him: 'And so Plato says well ...' (38), and calls him ὁ μέγας Πλάτων, the great Plato (52). Although at times in his writings Philo explicitly criticizes Plato (*On the Contemplative Life* 57–59), nevertheless he does not refrain from calling him also ὁ ἱερώτατος Πλάτων, the most sacred Plato (*Every Good Man is Free* 13).

In line with this Jewish affinity with Plato is Josephus' appreciation of this philosopher. In his writing *Against Apion*, written around the turn of the first century AD, Josephus ventures historiographical views similar to those of Aristobulus, to the effect that the wisest of the Greeks learned to adopt fitting conceptions of God from principles with which Moses supplied them. Among these Greeks, Josephus also mentions Plato by name, adding that such philosophers appear to have held views concerning the nature of God which were similar to those of Moses (2.168).

Later on, Josephus even defends Plato's attempt to draft a constitution (πολιτεία) and code (νομοί) against current criticism: Plato is continually being scoffed at and held up to ridicule by those who claim to be expert statesmen (2.222–225). Interestingly, Josephus defends Plato against unjustified criticism of his *Republic*, showing Jewish acquaintance with this specific dialogue in the first century AD. It is no surprise then that Josephus further demonstrates his full sympathy with Plato

<sup>24</sup> Translation taken from C.R. Holladay, *Fragments from Hellenistic Jewish Authors*, vol. 3: *Aristobulus* (Texts and Translations 39; Pseudepigrapha Series 13), Atlanta, Georgia 1995.

by pointing out analogies between Plato's laws and those of the Jews, and highlights points in which Plato followed the example of Moses, the Jewish law-giver (2.256–257). In so doing, Josephus refers implicitly to Plato's *Republic*.

It seems highly relevant to our present enquiry that there is so much explicit and positive reference among Jews to Plato in the periods both immediately preceding and contemporaneous with John. Supposing that John indeed had some knowledge of Plato, the examples from Aristobulus, Philo, and Josephus illustrate that this would not have been altogether impossible or even exceptional for a Jew. A possible objection might be that Aristobulus and Philo represent the highly Hellenized Judaism of Alexandria, and that Josephus wrote his *Against Apion* in Rome, whereas the origins of John's Gospel lie in first-century Palestine.

However, modern research has argued that an imagined contrast between a non-Hellenized Palestine and a Hellenized Jewish Diaspora is unwarranted.<sup>25</sup> This can also be clearly shown with regard to the issue at hand, since explicit Jewish acquaintance with Plato is not restricted to the Diaspora. Diogenes Laertius, the early third-century AD author of a compendium on the lives and doctrines of ancient philosophers, mentions Justus of Tiberias as the source of an apocryphal story about Plato's intercession at Socrates' trial (*Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 2.41). Justus is known from Josephus' writings as the son of a Jewish faction leader in Tiberias (*The Life* 31–42). Tiberias was one of the chief cities of Galilee besides Sepphoris and Gabara (123), founded by Herod the Great's son Herod Antipas after the accession in 14 AD of Emperor Tiberius and named after this dignitary (*The Jewish War* 2.167–168; *Jewish Antiquities* 18.36). Tiberias not only had a Galilean-Jewish population, but also Greek residents (*Jew. Ant.* 18.37; *The Life* 67). In this Galilean city then, the Jew Justus was able to cultivate an interest in Plato.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., M. Hengel, *Jews, Greeks and Barbarians: Aspects of the Hellenization of Judaism in the pre-Christian Period*, Philadelphia 1980, esp. chap. 12: 'The Influence of Hellenistic Civilization in Jewish Palestine down to the Maccabean Period'; J.J. Collins and G.E. Sterling (eds), *Hellenism in the Land of Israel* (Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity Series 13), Notre Dame, Indiana 2001; M. Hengel, 'Judaism and Hellenism Revisited,' in: Collins & Sterling, *Hellenism in the Land of Israel*, Notre Dame 2001, 6–37, esp. 7: 'it is misleading to distinguish fundamentally between a "Palestinian Judaism" in the motherland and "Hellenistic Judaism" in the Diaspora as is still usual.'

<sup>26</sup> On Justus of Tiberias, see E. Schürer, G. Vermes, F. Millar, M. Black, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 BC—AD 135)*, vol. 1, Edinburgh 1973, 34–37.

As Josephus acknowledges, Justus was not unversed in Greek *paideia*: οὐδ' ἄπειρος ἦν παιδείας τῆς παρ' Ἑλλήσιν (*The Life* 40). This shows that Justus had had access, in some way, to Greek learning. It implies knowledge of Greek, although not necessarily of the standards achieved by the Herodian rulers who—according to Josephus—had reached the highest degree of Greek *paideia* (*The Life* 359). Levels of proficiency in Greek will have varied. Josephus himself says that he has 'laboured strenuously to partake of the realm of Greek prose and poetry, after having gained a knowledge of Greek grammar' (*Jew. Ant.* 20.263).

But apart from knowledge of Greek, Justus must also have become familiar with philosophy, as is apparent from his interest in Plato and Socrates. This need not suggest that Justus was formally trained. Although philosophy seems to have constituted the climax of Greek *paideia* after preliminary studies (Philo, *On the Preliminary Studies* 74–76)<sup>27</sup> and to have been an element of formal, institutionalized education (*On the Special Laws* 2.229–230), it was also accessible through less formal channels. As Philo shows, men can also be involved in the study of philosophy from the very cradle and in a less systematic way (*On Drunkenness* 51).<sup>28</sup> In the Hellenistic and Roman period, Greek culture was spread by the sum total of institutions like gymnasia, palaestrae, libraries, theatres, thermae, temples, stadiums, forums, and agoras.<sup>29</sup> Palestine could not and did not avoid this 'global' process of Hellenization.

In Palestine, Greek culture had been a presence since Alexander the Great, and even the allegedly anti-Hellenistic revolt of the Jewish Hasmoneans (the 'Maccabees') in 168/167 BC seems to have been directed only against the excessive policy of one particular Greek-Seleucid ruler, Antiochus IV Epiphanes. The Hasmoneans themselves,

<sup>27</sup> Cf. A. Mendelson, *Secular Education in Philo of Alexandria* (Monographs of the Hebrew Union College 7), Cincinnati 1982, chap. 2.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Mendelson, *Secular Education*, 44. Cf. also T. Dorandi, 'Organization and Structure of the Philosophical Schools,' in: K. Algra, J. Barnes, J. Mansfeld and M. Schofield (eds), *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, chap. 3, esp. 61: 'Beside this kind of organized and institutionalized school (*scholai, diatribai*), there were also groups of people who got together to practise philosophy in an apparently less rigidly structured form, which could be defined as a "pseudo-school" or, better, "philosophical tendency" (*agōgai* or *haereseis*).'

<sup>29</sup> See the following articles in *Der neue Pauly*: I. Hadot, 'Gymnasion, II. Das Hellenistische Gymnasion,' vol. 5 (1998), 23–27; K. Vössing, 'Bibliothek, II.B Bibliothekswesen,' vol. 2 (1997), 640–647; J. Gerber and V. Binder, 'Hellenisierung,' vol. 5 (1998), 301–312; and J. Christes, 'Bildung,' vol. 2 (1997), 663–673; 'Erziehung,' vol. 4 (1998), 110–120; and 'Paideia,' vol. 9 (2000), 150–152.



as a matter of fact, took the initiative of sending diplomatic letters to Sparta (*1 Maccabees* 12:1–23; Josephus, *Jew. Ant.* 13.163–170). In this correspondence the Hasmoneans stated that they wanted to renew their ties of brotherhood (ἀδελφότης) in reply to a previous Spartan letter in which it was stressed that Spartans and Jews were brothers and that they both descended from Abraham: εἰσὶν ἀδελφοὶ καὶ (...) εἰσὶν ἐκ γένους Ἀβραάμ (*1 Macc* 12:21; cf. Josephus, *Jew. Ant.* 12.225–226: ἐξ ἑνὸς [...] γένους). This means that they were regarded as sharing the same συγγένεια, the same kinship (Josephus, *Jew. Ant.* 13.164; 13.170).<sup>30</sup> The construction of Jewish kinship with the Spartans shows that even the Hasmoneans wanted to be part of the Hellenistic world. It is just one example of the general tendency in the world of Hellenism to discover one's Greek origins and to express this in terms of kinship.<sup>31</sup>

A pivotal role in this ongoing process of Hellenization was played by Herod the Great and his successors, to whom the Romans granted the Hasmoneans' political power from 37 BC onwards. Herod's philhellenism led to an increase in institutions such as cities, gymnasia and theatres by which Greek culture was spread both within and without his Jewish kingdom. To the North of his territories, Herod provided gymnasia,<sup>32</sup> theatres, halls, porticoes, temples and agoras for cities such as

<sup>30</sup> For a positive Jewish attitude towards the Spartans, see also *1 Macc* 14:16–23; Josephus, *Jew. War* 1.513–515; *Against Apion* 2.225–227. Spartans and Cyrenians were also thought to be genetically related, according to Josephus, *Jew. War* 2.381.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. T. Rajak, 'Hasmoneans,' in: S. Hornblower and A. Spawforth, *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, Oxford & New York 1996<sup>3</sup> (= *OCD* <sup>3</sup>), 668–669; S. Hornblower, 'Hellenism, Hellenization,' in: *OCD* <sup>3</sup>, 677–679; and Hornblower, 'Kinship,' 807–808. For the importance of establishing συγγένεια as a 'passport to Greek culture,' see I. Hadot, 'Gymnasion, II. Das Hellenistische Gymnasion,' in: *Der neue Pauly*, vol. 5 (1998), 23–27, esp. 26. On this Greek practice, in which Jews participated, see O. Curty, *Les parentés légendaires entre cités grecques: catalogue raisonné des inscriptions contenant le terme suggeneia et analyse critique* (Centre de recherches d'histoire et de philologie de la IV<sup>e</sup> section de l'École pratique des hautes études III; Hautes études du monde gréco-romain 20), Genève 1995; C.P. Jones, *Kinship Diplomacy in the Ancient World* (Revealing Antiquity 12), Cambridge, Massachusetts 1999 (these monographs were kindly brought to my attention by J.N. Bremmer); and S. Lücke, *Syngeneia: epigraphisch-historische Studien zu einem Phänomen der antiken griechischen Diplomatie* (Frankfurter althistorische Beiträge 5), Frankfurt am Main 2000.

<sup>32</sup> Even though the installation of a Greek gymnasium at Jerusalem during the excessively anti-Jewish policy of Antiochus IV Epiphanes sparked off the Hasmonean revolt in 168/167 BC (*1 Macc* 1:14–15; *2 Macc* 4:7–12; and Josephus, *Jew. Ant.* 12.240–241), Jews as such were not against participation in gymnasia. Josephus refers to Greek-Seleucid privileges that Jews who went to the gymnasium but were unwilling to use foreign oil, out of religious scruples about purity, should receive recompensation from the gymnasiarchus (the general supervisor of the civic gymnasia) to pay for their own

Tripolis, Damascus, Ptolemais, Berytus (Beirut), Tyre and Sidon (Josephus, *Jew. War* 1.422). But within his territories too he built theatres, both in Jerusalem (Josephus, *Jew. Ant.* 15.268–280)<sup>33</sup> and in Caesarea, where he also built an amphitheatre and agoras (*Jew. War* 1.415; *Jew. Ant.* 15.341). According to Josephus, the theatre of Jerusalem was acceptable to most Jews, as soon as they were reassured that it contained no images which would desecrate the Holy City (*Jew. Ant.* 15.272–280). As was acknowledged in another case, even a visit to the theatre in Caesarea would not render one impure (*Jew. Ant.* 19.330–334).

This enumeration of Herod's building activities shows the vast range of his programme, which also included the foundation of a new town in Samaria, only one day's journey from Jerusalem. The new town was called Sebaste after Augustus and contained a massive temple devoted to the emperor (Josephus, *Jew. War* 1.403; *Jew. Ant.* 15.292–298).<sup>34</sup> This shows that Herod's philhellenism manifested itself both within and without his Jewish kingdom.

To turn back to Justus of Tiberias, the entire digression on the Hellenization of Palestine from Alexander the Great, through the Hasmonean period, right up to the Herodian-Roman age sharpens our awareness of how Justus could have become acquainted with Plato even in Galilee. As a citizen of Tiberias, a city founded by Herod Antipas and inhabited by a mixed Jewish-Galilean and Greek population, he could have learned Greek either informally or through some form of education. The remains of a large early Roman building in Tiberias have been tentatively interpreted as a palaestra or a gymnasium.<sup>35</sup> Justus might have encountered Platonic philosophy through a (visiting) teacher who taught in such palaestrae and gymnasia.<sup>36</sup> But it

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kind of oil (*Jew. Ant.* 12.119–120). For further evidence of Jews participating in gymnasia, see M.H. Williams, *The Jews Among the Greeks and Romans: A Diaspora Sourcebook*, London 1998, 107: V.1–2; 112–114: V.20–24. Philo, too, seems to speak from personal experience. See Philo, *On the Special Laws* 2.229–230; cf. Mendelson, *Secular Education*, 28–33.

<sup>33</sup> On the importance of Herod for the Hellenization of Jerusalem, see K.M. Kenyon, 'Aelia Capitolina (Jerusalem)', in: R. Stillwell (ed.), *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Classical Sites*, Princeton, New Jersey, 12–13: 'Jerusalem cannot really be said to have entered the Classical world until the time of Herod the Great in the last third of the first century BC' (p. 12).

<sup>34</sup> On Herod's philhellenic building programme, see D.W. Roller, *The Building Program of Herod the Great*, Berkeley 1998.

<sup>35</sup> A. Negev, 'Tiberias,' in: Stillwell (ed.), *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Classical Sites*, 920–921.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Morgan, *Literate Education*, 29: 'Some teachers may have taught in gymnasia or palaestrae, but we are not in a position to say that they were regular places for schools.'

is the entire interface between institutions such as cities, agoras, gymnasias and theatres in the region which accounts for the transmission of Greek culture. In the theatres of both Jerusalem and Caesarea, for instance, Greek plays will have been staged.<sup>37</sup>

In light of this culture, John's Gospel with its Platonic concept of the 'true light' could have been written anywhere in the Palestinian area. Whether John's Gospel had its roots in the Galilean city of Tiberias (*John* 6:1, 23; 21:1), had a Samaritan connection, as the opponents' characterization of Jesus a 'Samaritan' might suggest (8:48; cf. 4:39–40),<sup>38</sup> or originated in Jerusalem, Greek culture was sufficiently present in Galilee, Samaria, and Judea to account for John's Greek conceptualizations.<sup>39</sup> All that is needed for John's Gospel to be written is for an author like Justus of Tiberias to become a follower of Jesus. That something like this is not unthinkable, may be gleaned from Josephus, who, after expert training in the 'philosophical schools' of the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes, deemed this education insufficient and became a devotee of a certain Bannus in the desert for a period of three years (*The Life* 10–12).<sup>40</sup>

What I suggest is that the author of John's Gospel might well have become acquainted with Plato within the context of Greek *paideia* somewhere in Palestine, just as happened in the case of Justus of Tiberias. That the author of John's Gospel became familiar with Plato's allegory

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Although there is, remarkably enough, an 'almost complete absence, for any period of antiquity, of evidence for any kind of formal central control or organization of teachers or schools or what was taught' (Morgan, p. 25), there is ample evidence of the ubiquity of education. According to Morgan, p. 3, 'at any time from the early third century BCE until the end of the Roman empire, you could be fairly sure of finding a teacher, or more than one, in most towns and many villages, in the forum, at the crossroads, in the gymnasium, or in a private house or garden.'

<sup>37</sup> Cf. J.N. Bremmer, 'The Atonement in the Interaction of Greeks, Jews, and Christians,' in: J.N. Bremmer and F. García Martínez (eds), *Sacred History and Sacred Texts in Early Judaism* (Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology 5), Kampen 1992, 75–93, esp. 92 and 81–82. On archaeological finds of a theatre in Jerusalem, see R. Reich and Y. Billig, 'A Group of Theatre Seats Discovered near the South-Western Corner of the Temple Mount', *Israel Exploration Journal* 50 (2000) 175–184 (I owe this reference to the kind suggestion of J.N. Bremmer).

<sup>38</sup> For a Samaritan background to John, see R.E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, London 1979, 36–40.

<sup>39</sup> Greek conceptualizations in John would be even less surprising if John were written in Ephesus, as Irenaeus claims (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1; cf. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.8.4).

<sup>40</sup> For a commentary on this passage, see S. Mason, *Life of Josephus: Translation and Commentary* (Flavius Josephus Translation and Commentary 9), Leiden 2001, 15–20.

of the cave in particular can be explained from the fact that in antiquity this simile in book VII of the *Republic* was well-known among Plato's works. Philo, for instance, draws on it in his criticism of contemporary sophists, and says that they,

unable to discern the intellectual light (τὸ νοητὸν φῶς) through the weakness of the soul's eye (...) as dwellers in perpetual night disbelieve those who live in the daylight, and think that all their tales of what they have seen around them (...) are wild phantom-like inventions

(*Every Good Man is Free* 5).

The parable or traces of it are also found in, among others, Plutarch,<sup>41</sup> Alcinous,<sup>42</sup> Iamblichus,<sup>43</sup> Gnostic authors,<sup>44</sup> and Plotinus.<sup>45</sup>

## 2.6. *Lazarus and Plato's cave*

If indeed Plato was known among Jews, even among Jews in first-century AD Galilee, as the case of Justus of Tiberias demonstrates, it is no surprise that John, too, could be familiar with him. Moreover,

<sup>41</sup> See Plutarch, *How the Young Man Should Study Poetry* 36E: 'But when they (the young men) hear the precepts of the philosophers, which go counter to such opinions, at first astonishment and confusion and amazement take hold of them, since they cannot accept or tolerate any such teaching, unless, just as if they were now to look upon the sun after having been in utter darkness, they have been made accustomed, in a reflected light, as it were, in which the dazzling rays of truth are softened by combining truth with fable, to face facts of this sort without being distressed, and not to try to get away from them' (cf. *Republic* 515E).

<sup>42</sup> Alcinous, *Handbook of Platonism* 27.4, 180.28–39.

<sup>43</sup> Iamblichus, *Protrepticus* 15–16.

<sup>44</sup> See the Gnostic Naassenes in Hippolytus, *The Refutation of All Heresies* 5.10.2: ποτὲ (μὲν) βασιλ(ειον) ἔχουσα βλέπει τὸ φῶς, ποτὲ δ' εἰς (σπ)ήλαιον ἐκρη(πτο)μένη κλάει (ed. M. Marcovich, *Hippolytus: Refutatio Omnium Haeresium* [Patristische Texte und Studien 25], Berlin & New York 1986, 171; cf. Th. Wolbergs, *Griechische religiöse Gedichte der ersten nachchristlichen Jahrhunderte*, vol. 1: *Psalmen und Hymnen der Gnosis und des frühen Christentums* [Beiträge zur klassischen Philologie 40], Meisenheim am Glan 1971, 49–50): 'Sometimes she (the soul) would live in a royal palace and look at the light; but sometimes she is being thrown in a cave, and there she weeps' (cf. M. Marcovich, 'The Naassene Psalm in Hippolytus [*Haer.* 5.10.2],' in: B. Layton [ed.], *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, vol. 2: *Sethian Gnosticism* [Studies in the History of Religions 41.2], Leiden 1981, 770–778).

<sup>45</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads* 2.9.6: 'there is nothing here but a jargon invented to make a case for their (the Gnostics') school: all this terminology is piled up only to conceal their debt to the ancient Greek philosophy which taught, clearly and without bombast, the ascent from the cave and the gradual advance of souls to a truer and truer vision' (transl. S. MacKenna). That these Gnostics were Christian can be surmised on account of Porphyry, *On the Life of Plotinus* 16. In my view, John had already appropriated Plato's allegory of the cave.

the cave parable from book VII of Plato's *Republic* was among the best-known passages of his writings.

The following direct or inverted parallels between book VII of Plato's *Republic* and John suggest themselves. This parallelism is found either in John's Lazarus story, in the story about the blind man, or at other levels of John's Gospel. It appears impracticable to treat these levels in isolation, as various threads from the contents and context of Plato's cave parable seem to be interwoven into the Johannine fabric. To use another image, the resonances of particular Platonic themes from the cave parable make themselves heard throughout John's Gospel. For this reason, I shall go backwards and forwards between the story of Lazarus, that of the blind man, and the Gospel at large.

The two most important reasons to assume that John's Gospel echoes themes from Plato's cave parable are (1) the specific combination of 'light' (φῶς) and 'cave' (σπήλαιον), and (2) the characterization of this light as the true, non-physical light which enlightens all.

#### 1. *The pair 'light' and 'cave'*

At the beginning of book VII of his *Republic*, Plato depicts men who dwell in a cave-like dwelling (ἐν καταγείῳ οἰκῇσιν σπηλαιώδει) which, over the entire width of the cave (παρὰ πᾶν τὸ σπήλαιον), is open to the light (φῶς; 514A).

This specific combination of the terms 'light' and 'cave' reoccurs later, when Socrates tells Glaucon, his discussion partner, that as part of their education the best pupils, who had once been liberated from the cave, should be sent down into the cave (σπήλαιον) again. After a fifteen-year period, they should be brought out again and required to

turn upwards the vision of their souls and fix their gaze on that which sheds light (φῶς) on all, and when they have thus beheld the good itself they shall use it as a pattern for the right ordering of the state and the citizens and themselves throughout the remainder of their lives

(539E–540A).<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> As W. Jaeger has emphasized, despite this political talk about 'the ordering of the state,' the 'ultimate interest of Plato's *Republic* is the human soul. Everything else he says about the state and its structure (...) is introduced merely to give an "enlarged image" of the soul and its structure. But even in the problem of the soul, Plato's interest is not theoretical but practical. He is a *builder of souls*. He makes Socrates move the whole state with one lever, the education which forms the soul.' See W. Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, vol. 2: *In Search of the Divine Centre* (translated by G. Highet), New York & Oxford 1943, 199.

This explicit contrast between cave and light also features in John's story about Lazarus. Because Jesus, the light of this cosmos (11:9: τὸ φῶς τοῦ κόσμου τούτου), is away from Lazarus, Lazarus lacks this light (11:10: φῶς), stumbles to his death, and is buried in a cave (11:38: σπήλαιον). After Jesus has awakened him, in his final public teaching in Jerusalem, Jesus exhorts his audience to be receptive towards the light (φῶς; 12:35–36, 46) and to become children of light (12:36).

The combination of 'light' and 'cave' is a clear echo of Plato's parable.<sup>47</sup> The change from the 'normal' prisoners' cave of Plato's parable into the burial cave in the Lazarus story can be explained as the outcome of some further associative thought. Plotinus, too, in his retelling of Plato's parable, portrays the souls as having been *buried* in a cave: τεθάφθαι τε λέγεται καὶ ἐν σπηλαίῳ εἶναι (*Enneads* 4.8.4).<sup>48</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Other examples of the after-effects of Plato's cave and light imagery are probably the traditions about Jesus' birth in a cave and the cave symbolism in the cult of Mithras. See Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 78.6 on Jesus' birth in a cave; this is understood as a fulfillment of the prophecy of *Isaiah* 33:16 LXX: 'he shall dwell in a high cave (σπήλαιον) of a strong rock' (70.1–2), a prophecy which Justin regards to have been imitated by Mithras (70.1–2; 78.6). The cave is also mentioned in the *Protoevangelium of James* 38–39, and in Origen, *Against Celsus* 1.51 (cf. H. Chadwick, *Origen: 'Contra Celsum'*, Cambridge 1953, 47 note 5). In the *Protoevangelium of James* the birth of Jesus in a cave is accompanied by a great light: 'And they (Joseph and the midwife) went to the place of the cave, and behold, a dark (bright) cloud overshadowed the cave. And the midwife said: "My soul is magnified to-day, for my eyes have seen wonderful things; for salvation is born to Israel." And immediately the cloud disappeared from the cave, and a great light (φῶς) appeared in the cave (σπήλαιον), so that our eyes could not bear it. A short time afterwards that light withdrew until the child appeared' (19:2; transl. O. Cullmann, in: W. Schneemelcher and R. McL. Wilson [eds], *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 1: *Gospels and Related Writings*, Cambridge & Louisville, Kentucky 1991). See M. Gervers, 'The Iconography of the Cave in Christian and Mithraic Tradition,' in: U. Bianchi (ed.), *Mysteria Mithrae* (Études Préliminaires aux Religions Orientales dans l'Empire Romain 80), Leiden 1979, 579–599; and A. Meredith, 'Plato's "Cave" (*Republic* vii 514a–517e) in Origen, Plotinus, and Gregory of Nyssa,' in: E.A. Livingstone (ed.), *Studia Patristica* 27, Louvain 1993, 49–61. The cave of Mithras receives a Platonizing interpretation in Porphyry, *The Cave of the Nymphs in the Odyssey* 6. See R. Turcan, *Mithras Platonius: Recherches sur l'Hellénisation philosophique de Mithra* (Études Préliminaires aux Religions Orientales dans l'Empire Romain 47), Leiden 1975, esp. 23–27, 65–67, 133; cf. also D. Ulansey, 'Mithras and the Hypercosmic Sun,' in: J.R. Hinnells (ed.), *Studies in Mithraism*, Rome 1994, 257–264.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. E. Hoffmann, 'Der pädagogische Gedanke in Platons Höhlengleichnis,' in: H.-Th. Johann (ed.), *Erziehung und Bildung in der heidnischen und christlichen Antike* (Wege der Forschung 377), Darmstadt 1976, 118–131, esp. 130: 'Der Weg der Erziehung (...) verlangt eine Abkehr von der natürlichen Sinnlichkeit; aber er löst dem Menschen die Fesseln, führt ihn ins freie Reich der Gedanken, ermöglicht ihm, nach übersinnlichen Gesichtspunkten die Welt zu verstehen (...). (...) Wer ihn gegangen ist, weiß nun, daß die Höhle ein Grab war'.

## 2. *The nature of the light*

Apart from the distinctive combination of ‘cave’ and ‘light,’ it is also the characterization of this light which points in the direction of Platonic thought. In Plato’s cave parable, the ascension from the cave upwards (ἡ ἄνω ἀνάβασις) signifies the soul’s ascension to the intelligible region (ἡ εἰς τὸν νοητὸν τόπον τῆς ψυχῆς ἄνοδος), and the sunlight it encounters outside the cave is emitted by the idea of good. This idea, according to Plato, is indeed the cause for all things of all that is right and beautiful, giving birth in the visible world (ἐν τε ὁρατῷ) to light (φῶς) and its author (the sun), whereas in the intelligible world (ἐν τε νοητῷ) it itself is the power of truth (ἀλήθεια) and reason (517B–C). Implicitly, Plato draws a distinction here between the physical light, which is emitted by the visible sun, and the non-physical, true, intelligible light—the distinction we have come across before and which evolves from the mention of the true light in Plato’s *Phaedo*.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, this non-physical, intelligible light comes into view again at the end of book VII of Plato’s *Republic* in the passage, already quoted, in which Socrates says that the best pupils should be required ‘to turn upward the vision of their souls and fix their gaze on that which sheds light (φῶς) on all:’ εἰς αὐτὸ ἀποβλέψαι τὸ πᾶσι φῶς παρέχον (540A). This light is the non-physical, intelligible, true light.

It is this light which is in view in John, too. The Lazarus story is both introduced, and its meaning reinforced, by Jesus’ self-proclamation as τὸ φῶς τοῦ κόσμου τούτου (11:9–10; 12:35–36, 46), the light of this cosmos. The same holds true of the introduction to the story of the blind man (9:5; cf. 8:12). Jesus’ repeated self-designation as the light of this cosmos seems to suggest a link between the two stories. The link between someone who was born blind and someone dwelling in a cave seems anything but far-fetched. Sextus Empiricus, for instance, in what seems to be an allusion to Plato’s cave parable, says that those who live in subterranean and unlighted caves (οἱ τε ἐν καταγείοις τισὶ καὶ ἀλαμπέσι σπηλαίοις βιοτεύοντες) and those who are blind from birth (οἱ ἐκ γενετῆς πηροὶ) do not hold a true conception of particular things

<sup>49</sup> On the close thematic similarity between the ascent from the cave towards the light of the sun in Plato’s *Republic* 517B and the true light in his *Phaedo* 109E, cf. Beierwaltes, *Lux Intelligibilis*, 63: ‘Dieser Aufstieg aus der Höhle ist im Phaidon mythisch vorgebildet: aus den Höhlen (κοῖλα 109B5, 109C2) gelangen nur ganz reine Naturen zur Betrachtung des wahren Lichtes und der wahren Erde (τὸ ἀληθινὸν φῶς καὶ ἡ ὥς ἀληθῶς γῆ 109E). Auch hier gibt es Erkenntnisstufen, die vom dunklen Unten zum hellen Oben reichen.’

(*Against the Physicists* 2.175 [10.174]). In John, the blind-born (9:1: τυφλὸς ἐκ γενετῆς) and Lazarus seem to be connected in a similar way. Both encounter the light of the cosmos, which has been introduced in John as the true light which enlightens everyone: τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν, ὃ φωτίζει πάντα ἄνθρωπον (1:9).

One can scarcely fail to notice the close parallel between this light that enlightens all and 'that which sheds light on all' in Plato's *Republic* (540A). Both the distinctive contrast between cave and light, and this light's identity as the true, non-physical light seem to point to John's familiarity with the simile of the cave in Plato's *Republic*.

How much else from book VII of the *Republic* resonates in John must probably remain a matter for debate. I shall discuss some other less direct, sometimes even inverted but nevertheless highly remarkable parallels. If one assumes that the direct parallels mentioned above must be the result of John's *paideia* in Greek culture, these other similarities can probably also best be explained as due to John's acquaintance with Plato's *Republic*. For the sake of clarity, I shall continue enumerating the possible points of contact between John and book VII of Plato's *Republic*. These points consist of: (3) an implicit comparison between Socrates and Jesus in John's Gospel, (4) the release from bondage in the cave, (5) the issue of 'inserting vision into blind eyes,' (6) the contents of Plato's *paideia*, and, finally, (7) the accessibility of his *paideia*.

### 3. *Socrates and Jesus*

To start with an 'inverted' parallel, I draw attention to the beginning of Plato's allegory of the cave. After Plato has told how one prisoner is freed from his bonds, dragged up the ascent, comes out into the light of the sun and, after a period of habituation, is able to see the things higher up (τὰ ἄνω; 516A), Plato subsequently describes what would happen to this man εἰ πάλιν ὁ τοιοῦτος καταβὰς (516E), if he were to go down again. According to Plato, he would provoke laughter among his former fellow prisoners who would be ignorant of his need to adjust again to the darkness of the cave, and would argue instead that his eyes had apparently been ruined when he had gone upwards (ὥς ἀναβὰς ἄνω), so that it would not be worthwhile even to attempt such an ascent (517A). Finally, if it were possible to kill the man who now tried to release them and lead them up, they would do so (517A).

Plato is clearly alluding here to the death of Socrates, and implies that Socrates' contemporaries did indeed kill him when he came down



again: πάλιν ὁ τοιοῦτος καταβάς. In John this action of coming down is ascribed to Jesus, as he is ὁ ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καταβάς, the one who came down from heaven (3:13). At this point, John seems to invert the parallel between Socrates and Jesus. Whereas Socrates came down (καταβάς) into the cave after his upward ascension (ἀναβάς ἄνω), Jesus did not ascend prior to his descent. In fact, John emphasizes, nobody ascended into heaven except the one who came down from heaven: οὐδεὶς ἀναβέβηκεν εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν εἰ μὴ ὁ ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καταβάς (3:13).

In this way, John inverts the parallel between Socrates and Jesus: Jesus descended without prior ascension, and Socrates did not ascend to heaven at all. Later on in book VII of the *Republic* not just Socrates, but other gifted prisoners, too, are said to be led upwards to the light (φῶς), 'even as some are said to have gone up from Hades to the gods:' ὥσπερ ἐξ Ἅιδου λέγονται δὴ τινες εἰς θεοὺς ἀνελθεῖν (521C). Against this background, John's polemic is easier to understand.<sup>50</sup> It can hardly be a coincidence that in both Plato's *Republic* and in John the language of καταβαίνειν (to descend) and ἀναβαίνειν (to ascend) is highly dominant.<sup>51</sup> That is not to say that John's use of it has been occasioned by Plato, but at least its application will have been further shaped by Plato's *Republic*.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Borgen, 'The Gospel of John and Hellenism,' 102–104 and 116, esp. 103: 'In different forms the idea of ascent to heaven was widespread in the wider Hellenistic world. When John reacted against persons' claims of ascent within a Jewish context, he reacted against a Jewish (and Christian) phenomenon that at the same time took place within a Hellenistic context.'

<sup>51</sup> Καταβαίνειν in Plato, *Republic*, book VII, in 516E, 519D, 520C; καταβαίνειν in *John* in 1:51, 3:13, 6:33, 38, 41–42, 50–51, 58. Ἀναβαίνειν in Plato, *Republic*, book VII, in 517A, 519D and ἀνάβασις in 515E, 517B, 519D; ἀναβαίνειν in *John* in 1:51, 3:13, 6:62, 20:17. In addition to this, also κάτω (*Republic*, book VII, in 519B, 527B, 529A–C; *John* 8:23), ἄνω (*Republic*, book VII, in 516A, 517A–C, 525D, 527B, 529A–C, 533D; *John* 8:23, 11:41), and ἄνωθεν (*Republic*, book VII, in 514B, 518B; *John* 3:3, 7, 31 and 19:11) occur in both writings. On the importance of ἀνάβασις in Plato's *Republic*, see K. Albert, *Griechische Religion und Platonische Philosophie*, Hamburg 1980, 50–60: 'Anabasis,' esp. 50: 'In mehreren Dialogen geht Platon auf das Thema des Aufstiegs (...) ein. (...) Der Begriff der Anabasis wird im Zusammenhang mit dem "Höhlengleichnis" der *Politeia* mehrfach von Platon verwendet (515E, 517B, 519D)' and 54: 'Die (...) zuvor angeführten Texte sind die wichtigsten, in denen Platon die philosophische Erkenntnis als ἀνάβασις, als Aufstieg versteht, auch wenn das Wort selbst nur in der *Politeia* vorkommt.'

<sup>52</sup> The customary references to ascents into heaven in Jewish texts (see, e.g., A.F. Segal, 'Heavenly Ascent in Hellenistic Judaism, Early Christianity and their Environment', in: W. Haase [ed.], *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, vol. II.23.2, Berlin 1980, 1333–1394, esp. 1352–1368) do not seem to be sufficient, however. Ascents to heaven in Jewish literature are attributed to figures like Enoch, Abraham, Moses,

This conscious comparison between Socrates and Jesus seems to extend further. According to Plato, again alluding to Socrates, a man returning from divine contemplations to the miseries of men appears most ridiculous if, not yet accustomed to the darkness, he is compelled in courtrooms to contend about the shadows of justice (517D). This man's soul, Plato says, has come ἄνωθεν ἐκ φωτός, from the light above (518A–B). This description of Socrates' provenance again corresponds with John's portrayal of Jesus, who is ὁ ἄνωθεν ἐρχόμενος, he who comes from above (3:31). Both Socrates and Jesus are described as one who came down (ὁ καταβάς) from above (ἄνωθεν).

Moreover, it is not only Socrates who provokes a discussion about who is actually able to see, he who came down or those who had remained in darkness and question the usefulness of attempting to go upwards (517A). In John's story about the man who was blind from birth, a similar discussion develops between the blind man who has been cured from his blindness, the Pharisees who do not believe that the man had been blind and had now gained his sight, and Jesus, who causes offence by implying that those who claim to see are in fact themselves blind (9:13–41).

Finally, not just Socrates is killed after he has come down from the light above (517A). In John's story about Lazarus, immediately after Jesus' operating as the true light at Lazarus' cave, the Jewish Council plots to kill Jesus (11:53),<sup>53</sup> and to do away with Lazarus as well, because his awakening from the cave has caused many to put their faith into Jesus (12:9–11). In John, Socrates and Jesus seem to be put on a par,

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Baruch, and Isaiah, yet, as scholars such as Meeks, Dunn and Segal acknowledge, the Johannine pattern of descent and ascent has no direct parallel in Jewish literature. See W.A. Meeks, *The Prophet-King: Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology* (Supplements to Novum Testamentum 14), Leiden 1967, 297; J.D.G. Dunn, 'Let John be John a Gospel for Its Time', in: Peter Stuhlmacher (ed.), *Das Evangelium und die Evangelien* (WUNT 1.28), Tübingen 1983, 309–339, esp. 328–329; and Segal, 'Heavenly Ascent', 1375 on the *katabasis-anabasis* pattern in John: 'This is not the first time that the complete *anabasis-katabasis* pattern has been evidenced. But in the past the complete pattern has been limited either to a presumed descent and ascent of an individual soul or to the announcement of a divine message by means of an angel who ascends after having delivered it. Only one half of the journey had any real significance.' In this respect, the parallels between John and Plato's *Republic* have at least complementary value; they share a complete *anabasis-katabasis* pattern. I wish to thank E.J.C. Tigchelaar for discussing this issue with me.

<sup>53</sup> According to John, there had been previous attempts by the Jews to seize and kill Jesus (*John* 5:16, 18; 7:1, 19, 25, 30; 8:37, 40), but somehow John regards the resurrection of Lazarus as the turning point in the Jews' plotting to kill Jesus (11:53).

albeit in a somewhat concealed form, only recognizable for those who know both stories. It is, however, the same inverted parallelism which comes to the fore in later Christian authors, such as Justin Martyr (cf. also Van den Berg, this volume, §4). In his *Apologies*, Justin draws parallels between Socrates and Christ, whereby they are subsequently presented as opposites.<sup>54</sup> What happens in John is essentially the same.

#### 4. *The release from bonds*

Considering the sceptical and hostile reception for Socrates after his descent, Plato asks himself rhetorically, ‘And if it were possible to lay hands on and kill τὸν ἐπιχειροῦντα λύειν τε καὶ ἀνάγειν, the man who tried to release them and lead them up, would they not kill him?’ (517A). Depending on whether the previous parallels have proven convincing, the following resemblance between Plato’s simile of the cave and John’s story about Lazarus could also be relevant.

After Jesus has appeared at Lazarus’ cave as the world’s true light and has awakened him,<sup>55</sup> Lazarus emerges from the cave with his hands and feet still bound (δεδεμένος) and with his ὄψις, his face or power of vision, still bound round (περιεδέδετο) with a cloth (11:44a). Following Lazarus’ appearance, Jesus orders him to be released and permitted to go forth: Λύσατε αὐτὸν καὶ ἄφετε αὐτὸν ὑπάγειν (11:44b–c). This double command to release (λύειν) Lazarus and to let him go forth (ὑπ-άγειν) seems to mirror Socrates’ double endeavour to release (λύειν) the prisoners in the cave and lead them up (ἀν-άγειν). In Plato, the phase of release from bondage (532B: λύσις τε ἀπὸ τῶν δεσμῶν; cf. 515C) is subsequently followed by conversion (μεταστροφή) and ascent (ἐπάνοδος) to the world above (532B).

<sup>54</sup> See Justin, *Apologies* 1.5.4 and 2.10. Cf. also Lucianus, *The Death of Peregrinus* 12 on the Greek philosopher Peregrinus (died AD 165), who after his conversion to Christianity and imprisonment was called by the Christians ‘the new Socrates.’

<sup>55</sup> The implicit portrayal of Christianity as the true philosophy seems to have been visualized in the fourth century AD. See J. Kremer, *Lazarus: Die Geschichte einer Auferstehung. Text, Wirkungsgeschichte und Botschaft von Joh 11,1–46*, Stuttgart 1985, 160: ‘auf jüngeren Darstellungen aus dem 4. Jahrhundert, besonders auf vielen Sarkophagen, trägt der Erwecker des Lazarus einen Philosophen-Mantel und hält eine Buchrolle in Händen (...): die Auferweckung des Lazarus ist gleichsam ein Bild für die erlösende Kraft des Christentums als wahrer Philosophie.’ The general theme of resurrection from the dead was not altogether absent from Graeco-Roman literature. Cf. Kremer, p. 97: ‘In den Schriften der griechisch-römischen Antike ist von einer Totenerweckung mehrfach die Rede.’ Notably, in the tale of Er in Plato’s *Republic*, there is talk of a dead man, Er, coming to life again (*Republic*, book X, 614B–621D; see also Tieleman, this volume, §3).

### 5. *The issue of 'inserting vision into blind eyes'*

At this point there seems to arise a notable difference between John and Plato. In Plato's *Republic*, the release from bondage is followed by a conversion from the shadows to the images that cast them and to the light (532B). Plato stresses that conversion is not a matter of inserting vision (ὄψις) into τυφλοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς (blind eyes); rather, what is needed is the 'conversion (περιαγωγή) of the soul, not an art of producing vision in it, but on the assumption that it possesses vision but does not rightly direct it and does not look where it should, an art of bringing this about' (518B–D). Conversion is about redirecting one's eyes and power of vision, not about inserting vision into blind eyes, as if vision were not already existent. This seems to differ greatly from John's story about the blind man, whose eyes were blind and had to be opened (9:1–7). His restored vision is contrasted with the (mental) blindness of the Pharisees (9:39–41). In this respect, John and Plato do conflict, as Plato stresses the pre-existence of vision, even though it is in need of redirection by *paideia*.

Yet, even Plato is not entirely consistent in his application of the imagery of eye-sight. In book VII of his *Republic*, he also speaks about the fact that the soul's instrument of knowledge needs to be purified and kindled afresh by *paideia* because it has been destroyed and blinded (τυφλούμενον) by the ordinary habits of life (527D–E). Ignoring his earlier criticism of viewing *paideia* as the insertion of vision into blind eyes (518B–D), Plato himself slips into the common imagery of mental blindness.

At the same time, John's concept of the power of vision might be more subtle than it first appears. John's story of Lazarus seems to suggest that after Lazarus' awakening, his power of vision (ὄψις) was existent but needed to be uncovered (11:44). But even if one considers this interpretation too far-fetched, and accepts that John and Plato do indeed differ to some extent, it is nevertheless undeniable that there is some similarity in their figurative use of blindness, even though this mention of mental blindness is exceptional in Plato and, philosophically speaking, incorrect.

### 6. *The contents of Plato's paideia*

Besides the similarity between John and Plato's *Republic* with regard to the light and cave imagery, there are also striking resemblances in John with the *paideia* which, according to Plato, leads towards the light. Conversion, in Plato's view, entails the soul's turning (μεταστροφή) from

the shadows to the images that cast them and to the light (532B), from the world of generation to the truth (525C: μεταστροφή ἀπὸ γενέσεως ἐπ' ἀλήθειαν). This terminology of 'generation' and 'truth' is pivotal in both John and Plato. The soul must be turned around from the world of becoming (518C: ἐκ τοῦ γιγνομένου) and be cast free of the leaden weight of birth and becoming (γένεσις), which attach themselves to the soul by food and similar pleasures and gluttonies and turn down the vision of the soul (519A–B).

The same stress on the deficiency of the natural world as such is characteristic of John. It is not sufficient that one is born in the natural sense of physical generation (1:12–13); it is also necessary to be born from above: Δεῖ ὑμᾶς γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν (3:3, 7). This need is exemplified in the story of the man τυφλὸς ἐκ γενετῆς, blind from the hour of birth (9:1). For the same reason, Jesus exhorts his audience to long for the true bread (6:32: ὁ ἄρτος ὁ ἀληθινός), the real food (6:55: ἀληθῆς βρωσις) and real drink (ἀληθῆς πόσις), and not to strive after the food that passes away, but rather the food that lasts, the eternal food: ἐργάζεσθε μὴ τὴν βρωσιν τὴν ἀπολλυμένην ἀλλὰ τὴν βρωσιν τὴν μένουσαν εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον (6:27).<sup>56</sup> This concords with Plato's criticism of food that turns down the vision of the soul (519A–B) and with his recommendation of knowledge of that which always is, and not of a something which at some time comes into being and passes away: τοῦ ἀεὶ ὄντος γνῶσις, ἀλλὰ οὐ τοῦ ποτέ τι γιγνομένου καὶ ἀπολλυμένου (527B).

Conversion, in Plato's view, is not only turning away from the perishable world of generation, but also, positively, turning towards the truth: μεταστροφή ἀπὸ γενέσεως ἐπ' ἀλήθειαν (525C). In both Plato and John, ἀλήθεια (truth) is a key term and seems to be closely connected with φῶς (light), implying an etymological wordplay on ἀλήθεια, which is understood as ἀ-λήθεια, i.e. 'unconcealedness,' truth, and reality. According to Plato, after his ascent from the cave, the former prisoner is drawn into the light (φῶς), but at first unable to see even one of τὰ ἀληθῆ (515E–516A), the things that are real.<sup>57</sup> Light and truth

<sup>56</sup> Cf. also the dialogue with the Samaritan woman on the difference between normal water and living water in *John* 4:13. Just as the Samaritan woman asks Jesus: Κύριε, δός μοι τοῦτο τὸ ὕδωρ (4:15), thus in his dialogue about the true bread the audience asks him: Κύριε, πάντοτε δός ἡμῖν τὸν ἄρτον τοῦτον (6:34). Just as normal water does not stop one from becoming thirsty again (4:13), normal bread nourishes one only for a limited period (6:26).

<sup>57</sup> The same etymological understanding of ἀλήθεια and its link with φῶς underlies

are closely related, because what light is in the visible world, truth is in the intelligible world (517C). Those who convert towards τὰ ἀληθῆ, the things that are unconcealed, real and true (519B), experience a turning around from a nightly day to the true, veritable day (521C: περιαγωγή ἐκ νυκτερινῆς τινος ἡμέρας εἰς ἀληθινὴν) and lead the βίος τῆς ἀληθινῆς φιλοσοφίας, the life of true philosophy (521B; 521C).

The same interest in truth and its association with light is exhibited in John. It seems no coincidence that they occur first together as a compound expression, when Christ is called τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν (1:9), the unconcealed, true, real light. Using the wording of Plato's *Phaedo* (109E) to distinguish the true light from the physical light, John further implements the distinction between 'true' (ἀληθινός) and 'physical' by talking, for example, of the truth (ἀλήθεια) generated by Christ (1:14, 17), the readiness of those who pursue the truth (ἀλήθεια) to come to the light (φῶς; 3:21), the true worshippers (οἱ ἀληθινοὶ προσκυνηταὶ) who worship in spirit and truth (4:23), the true bread (ὁ ἄρτος ὁ ἀληθινός; 6:32), the true food (ἀληθὴς βρώσις; 6:55) and the true drink (ἀληθὴς πόσις) as opposed to perishable food.

It is no surprise that in John's Gospel this interest in truth culminates in Pontius Pilate's question: Τί ἐστὶν ἀλήθεια; (18:38), 'What is truth?' It seems probable that John conceived the answer to this question in terms of Christ's identity as τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν, the world's unconcealed, true, real light (1:9). In comparison with the Synoptic gospels, the language of truth is frequent and intense in John and this seems to be grounded in the notion of the true light. The close association between 'light' and 'truth' in John seems to reflect a concern which is very similar to the paideutic enterprise of book VII of Plato's *Republic*.<sup>58</sup>

In Plato, the conversion to the light (532B) and towards truth (519B; 525C; 527B) is also expressed by means of a contrast between 'upwards' or 'on high' (ἄνω) on the one hand, and 'downwards' or 'below' (κάτω)

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also Philo, *On Joseph* 68: φῶς γὰρ ἡ ἀλήθεια ('truth is light'); Plutarch, *The E at Delphi* 387A: 'Philosophy is concerned with truth, and the illumination of truth (ἀληθείας φῶς) is demonstration;' and Alcinous, *Handbook of Platonism* 10.3 (164.38-40): God is 'the truth (ἀλήθεια), because he is the origin of all truth, as the sun is of all light (φῶς).'

<sup>58</sup> If this is true, Rudolf Bultmann's well-known characterization of the Johannine Jesus becomes obsolete: 'Thema seiner Rede ist immer nur das Eine, daß der Vater ihn gesandt hat, daß er gekommen ist (...), daß er wieder gehen wird (...). So zeigt sich schließlich, das Jesus als der Offenbarer Gottes nichts offenbart, als daß er der Offenbarer ist (...). Johannes stellt also in seinem Evangelium nur das Daß der Offenbarung dar, ohne ihr Was zu veranschaulichen.' See R. Bultmann, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, Tübingen 1958<sup>3</sup>, 414, 418-419.

on the other. According to Plato, the conversion to τὰ ἀληθῆ, the things which are real, redirects the vision of the soul which had been turned downwards (κάτω; 519B). The knowledge of that which always is, as opposed to knowledge of that which comes into being and passes away, tends to draw the soul to truth (ἀλήθεια) and is productive of a philosophical attitude of mind, directing upwards (ἄνω) the faculties that are now wrongly turned downwards (κάτω; 527B). In Plato's dialogue, Socrates is unable to suppose that any other study would turn the soul's gaze upwards (ἄνω) than that which deals with being (τὸ ὄν) and the invisible (τὸ ἀόρατον). In his view, anyone who tries to learn about matters of the senses does not look up (ἄνω) but down (κάτω; 529B).

Similarly, in John's Gospel Jesus, in his dialogue with the Jews, having just asserted himself the world's true light (8:12), tells them: 'You are from below (ὕμεις ἐκ τῶν κάτω ἐστέ), I am from on high (ἐγὼ ἐκ τῶν ἄνω εἰμι)' (8:23). Jesus, as the one who has come from on high (ὁ ἄνωθεν ἐρχόμενος), is above all others, whereas he who is from the earth is earthly and uses earthly speech (3:31). This earthly, downward life, however, is turned upwards if one follows Jesus' imperative to be born from on high: Δεῖ ὑμᾶς γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν (3:7). And just as in Plato this upwards direction is concerned with learning (μαθήμα) concerning being (τὸ ὄν) and the invisible (τὸ ἀόρατον; 529B), in John, too, this upward life deals with instruction relating to the invisible God and the 'one who is' (ὁ ὢν) near, or from the side of God: Καὶ ἔσονται πάντες διδασκοὶ θεοῦ· πᾶς ὁ ἀκούσας παρὰ τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ μαθὼν ἔρχεται πρὸς ἐμέ. οὐχ ὅτι τὸν πατέρα ἐώρακέν τις εἰ μὴ ὁ ὢν παρὰ τοῦ θεοῦ (6:45b–46a; cf. 1:18 and 5:37–38).<sup>59</sup> Again, this shows that virtually the same didactic concern runs through John and book VII of Plato's *Republic*.

Of course, one could argue that Plato's *paideia* is more 'philosophical,' whereas John's didactics are of a more 'religious' nature. Yet, it may be anachronistic to play 'religion' and 'philosophy' off against one another. There seems to be a distinct language of conversion in Plato's allegory of the cave.<sup>60</sup> The ascent (ἐπάνοδος) from the subterranean

<sup>59</sup> Scholars agree that the designation of Christ as ὁ ὢν παρὰ τοῦ θεοῦ (6:46) or ὁ ὢν εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς (1:18) is a clear allusion to the designation of God as ὁ ὢν, the 'One who is,' in *Exodus* 3:14: Ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ὢν. In the Graeco-Roman period, the epithet ὁ ὢν was understood as a metaphysical designation for God. See M. Frede, 'Sein; Seiendes I. Antike,' in: *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 9 (1995), 170–180, esp. I.2 Hellenismus; and Th. Kobusch, 'Sein; Seinendes II. Spätantike; Patristik,' 180–186. See also M. Burnyeat's paper in the forthcoming TBN volume on the Name.

<sup>60</sup> See Ph. Rousseau, 'Conversion,' in: *OCD* <sup>3</sup>, 386–387; A.D. Nock, *Conversion: The*

cave to the sun follows the μεταστροφή, the turning from the shadows to the images that cast them and to the light (532B). This ascent to what really is (τοῦ ὄντος ἐπάνοδος), which is called 'true philosophy' (φιλοσοφία ἀληθής), is a περιαγωγή, a turning around of the soul, away from a nightly day towards the true, genuine day (521C; cf. 518C–E). It involves a process of being turned round (περιστρέφεισθαι) towards that which is unconcealed, true, and real (519B). It is a turning (μεταστροφή) from the world of generation to truth and essence (525C), an ἐπαναγωγή, a leading up of the soul (532C). This ascent (ἐπάνοδος) takes place along the road (ὁδός) which leads out of the cave (514A–B) and makes possible the soul's way up towards the intelligible region (ἡ εἰς τὸν νοητὸν τόπον τῆς ψυχῆς ἄνοδος; 517B). This ascension is what is meant in the parable by the upward ascension (ἡ ἄνω ἀνάβασις) and the sight of the things on high (θεῖα τῶν ἄνω; 517B).

This conversion language in Plato is very similar to the notion of being born from above (3:7: γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν) in John and his talk of Jesus as the way (ὁδός) which leads upwards to God's heavenly region (14:1–6) and along which God is seen (14:7–11). God has become visible inasmuch as Jesus has revealed himself as the world's true light (12:44–46). Conversion to Jesus, as John stresses in his description of the last instances of Jesus' public teaching, means converting to the unconcealed, true light (12:35–36; 12:46; cf. 8:12). Faith in Jesus (12:46) amounts to putting faith in the true light, with the consequence of becoming children of light: πιστεύετε εἰς τὸ φῶς, ἵνα υἱοὶ φωτὸς γένησθε (12:36).

Despite the general similarity of conversion language in Plato and John, an important difference arises in view of their evaluation of 'faith' (πίστις). In Plato's *Republic*, faith is but one step in the paideutic and dialectical process which advances through the stages of apprehension by means of images and shadows (εἰκασία), persuasion or faith (πίστις), understanding (διάνοια), and real knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) as opposed to mere opinion. In this dialectic process, which progresses by doing away with temporary hypotheses up to the first principle, the soul is led upwards (ἄνω) from the barbaric filth in which it is mired down (533C–534C).

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*Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo*, London 1933, chap. 11: 'Conversion to Philosophy,' and A.D. Nock, 'Bekehrung,' in: *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, vol. 2 (1954), 105–118.



Yet, there is remarkable agreement between Plato and John with regard to the function of dialectic. Dialectic can be defined as 'the science of conducting a philosophical dialogue (διαλέγεσθαι, "to converse") by exploring the consequences of premises asserted or conceded by an interlocutor,' and Plato's contribution to its development is his presentation of dialectic as 'co-operative investigation based on agreed premises,' which, also in his *Republic*, takes the form of oral debate.<sup>61</sup> In his *Republic*, dialectic is the supreme science. By dialectic (τῷ διαλέγεσθαι) one attempts through discourse of reason (διὰ τοῦ λόγου), and apart from all sensory perceptions, to find one's way to the very essence of each thing (532A).

In this sense, the longer dialogues of Jesus in John are dialectic, too. This has already been noted by C.H. Dodd, who emphasizes the contrast in form between the Johannine dialogues and those in the Synoptic gospels. Dodd assumes that the Johannine dialogues derive from the Hellenistic tradition, modelled on Plato's Socratic dialogues, of using 'dialogue as a vehicle for philosophical or religious teaching.'<sup>62</sup> Even though the interlocutor's role in John seems limited to misunderstanding, thus giving opportunities for the development of the dialogue, according to Dodd this also holds true for Plato's later dialogues, such as the *Timaeus*, in which 'the colloquy becomes little more than a device for introducing long monologues.'<sup>63</sup> A similar observation applies to book VII of Plato's *Republic*, in which Glaucon's role of interlocutor is very limited indeed.

The longer dialogues in John appear to be dialectic because they centre around particular sense-perceptible, physical, tangible actions or objects such as being born, water, and bread. In his dialogues Jesus uses words with multiple meanings, such as 'being born again/from above (ἄνωθεν)' (3:1-13), 'living water (ῥδωρ ζῶν)' (4:7-15), and 'bread

<sup>61</sup> D.N. Sedley, 'Dialectic,' in: *OCD* <sup>3</sup>, 461.

<sup>62</sup> C.H. Dodd, 'The Dialogue Form in the Gospels,' *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library Manchester* 37 (1955) 54-67; quotation from p. 63. Cf. also R. Majercik, 'Dialogue,' in: *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (1992), vol. 2, 185-188, esp. 187. Dodd is keen to stress that the fact that 'the evangelist has moulded his material into forms based upon current models of philosophical and religious teaching, instead of following the forms represented in the Synoptic Gospels' (p. 65) does not necessarily imply the unhistoricity of the material which John worked into his account. According to Dodd, 'it may well be that the still fluid tradition of the teaching of Jesus known to John included also material of which the Synoptic evangelists have taken no account, but which is of such a kind that it can be integrated with the Synoptic tradition' (pp. 66-67).

<sup>63</sup> Dodd, 'The Dialogue Form,' 62-64; quotation from p. 64.

from heaven' (6:26–59). The double entendre of these words occasions a further dialogue, in which the true, spiritual meaning of 'being born from above' (3:3, 7), 'living water' (4:10–11) and 'true bread' (6:32) is explored.<sup>64</sup> John seems to understand this kind of discourse as dialectic, because after Jesus' distinction between perishable food and true food (6:27, 55), his disciples react by saying: 'This way of reasoning (λόγος) is difficult' (6:60: Σκληρός ἐστὶν ὁ λόγος οὗτος).<sup>65</sup> Just as Platonic dialectic aims at distinguishing perceptions of sense from the essence of each thing through discourse of reason (διὰ τοῦ λόγου; 532A), Jesus' longer dialogues in John are equally concerned with a dialectic discourse of reason (λόγος; 6:60) which is undertaken to establish the difference between what is physical and what is truly real (ἀληθινός; ἀληθής). This teaching of Jesus seems to constitute one more resemblance between John and the paideutic programme set forth in book VII of Plato's *Republic*.

According to John, the paideutic potential of Jesus' teaching seems also to be recognized by the Greeks themselves. It is during Jesus' last days in Jerusalem that some Greeks (Ἕλληνες), who happen to be in Jerusalem at the time, approach Philip, one of Jesus' pupils, and express their wish to meet Jesus (12:20–21).<sup>66</sup> Having received their

<sup>64</sup> On double entendre in Jesus' discourses in John, see R. Kysar, 'John, the Gospel of,' in: *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (1992), vol. 3, 916–917: section C3–4.

<sup>65</sup> On the conscious use of λόγος in *John* 6:60, see the narrative analysis of John by M.W.G. Stibbe, *John's Gospel* (New Testament Readings), London & New York 1994, 24: 'The phrase translated "hard teaching" is *skleros logos*. It is a phrase which functions as a perfect title for Jesus who, in the prologue of John's gospel, is called God's *Logos*. In *John* 5–10, Jesus is truly the *Skleros Logos*, the Difficult Word.'

<sup>66</sup> On the ethnic Greek identity of the 'Greeks' in John, see, e.g., C.R. Matthews, *Philip: Apostle and Evangelist: Configurations of a Tradition* (Supplements to Novum Testamentum 105), Leiden 2002, 114: 'It seems clear that the word Ἕλληνες must refer to gentiles, albeit proselytes, in view of the just voiced complaint of the Pharisees that the κόσμος is going after Jesus (12:19). Corroboration for this interpretation may also be found in Jesus' prediction concerning the drawing of all people to himself in 12:32 (also note 11:52). It is appropriate that this intriguing incident involves Philip and Andrew, the two disciples among the Twelve with Greek names.' See also J. Frey, 'Heiden—Griechen—Gotteskinder: Zu Gestalt und Funktion der Rede von den Heiden im 4. Evangelium,' in: R. Feldmeier and U. Heckel (eds), *Die Heiden: Juden, Christen und das Problem des Fremden* (WUNT 1.70), Tübingen 1994, 228–268, esp. 250–251: 'Während (...) auf der Ebene der erzählten Geschichte in den Ἕλληνες Joh 12,20f. am ehesten Gottesfürchtige auf der Pilgerfahrt nach Jerusalem, in 7,35 hingegen heidnische Bewohner der griechischen Welt zu sehen sind, werden die Ἕλληνες in beiden Texten auf der allgemeingültigeren Ebene des johanneischen Symbolismus zu "Repräsentanten der griechischen Welt", ja zur Chiffre für die heidenchristlichen Adressaten des Evangeliums selbst.' Cf. also Josephus on Jesus' success among the Greeks (*Jew. Ant.* 18.63).

request (12:22), Jesus answers in a very indirect, non-concrete way (12:23a), talking about the prospect of bearing much fruit, the reward of following him, and the urgency of putting one's faith in the true light and becoming children of light (12:23b–36). This Greek perspective in John had already been introduced earlier in the Gospel, when Jews were said to ponder about the possibility of Jesus leaving Jerusalem for the 'Diaspora of the Greeks' with the purpose of teaching the Greeks (7:35–36): μή εἰς τὴν διασποράν τῶν Ἑλλήνων μέλλει πορεύεσθαι καὶ διδάσκειν τοὺς Ἕλληνας; This instruction of the Greeks, as John suggests, seems about to be realized at the very end of Jesus' public teaching. Even though Jesus' response to the request of the Greeks remains only indirect, John seems to highlight that the teachings of Jesus could satisfy Greek paideutic concerns, and that their contents have to do with his identity as the true light. This explicit focus on the 'Greeks' is absent from the Synoptic gospels,<sup>67</sup> and appears to be inseparable from John's interest in the light that enlightens all.

#### 7. *The accessibility of the true light*

Despite all similarities, there is an important difference between John and Plato with regard to the light's accessibility. In principle, according to both authors, the true light enlightens all. Christ, in John's view, is the light which gives light to everyone (1:9: τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν, ὃ φωτίζει πάντα ἄνθρωπον), and, according to Plato, those who receive Platonic *paideia* turn upwards the vision of their souls and fix their gaze on that which sheds light on all (540A: εἰς αὐτὸ ἀποβλέψαι τὸ πᾶσι φῶς παρέχον). Yet, in Plato's view the accessibility of the light is limited to the best natures, those capable of philosophy, who are forced to ascend from the cave into the light of day (519C–D; 520A) and are offered the fullest education possible (535A–540C).

This limited accessibility contrasts sharply with John's portrayal of the blind man and Lazarus as prototypes for each believer. All human beings, regardless of their intellectual potential, are invited to put their faith in the light and become children of light (12:35–36). In that sense, the parallelism between John and Plato is inverted, just as in the comparison between Jesus and Socrates. As Justin Martyr would put

<sup>67</sup> It is also John who tells us that the inscription on the cross was written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek (19:20). The only reference in the Synoptic gospels to Greeks and Greek language is in Mark's story of Jesus' meeting with the Grecian woman in Syrophenicia (*Mark* 7:26).

it: 'in Christ (...) not only philosophers and scholars believed, but also artisans and people entirely uneducated' (*Apologies* 2.10).<sup>68</sup>

Yet, notwithstanding the elitist nature of Platonic *paideia*, both John and Plato agree on the responsibilities of those who have seen the light. Neither John nor Plato has any Gnostic, world-denying inclinations. In Plato's *Republic*, the best natures who have been compelled to ascend towards the light and have received a better education than others are not allowed to linger outside the cave, but have eventually to take their turn to go down again to take charge of their former fellow prisoners (519C–D; 520C; 539E–540B). In Plato's imagery, the 'cave' into which the educated are sent down again (539E) symbolizes the cosmos. This is still implicit in Plato's *Republic*, but rendered explicit in later Platonist texts (see also Van den Berg, this volume, §1).<sup>69</sup>

In John, this world-affirming attitude is mirrored in Jesus' final prayer on behalf of his pupils immediately before his capture, trial, and death. In this prayer, Jesus does not ask God to take his pupils away from this cosmos, but to consecrate them by the truth (ἀλήθεια) now they are being sent into the cosmos. 'As you sent me into the cosmos,' Jesus tells God, 'I have sent them into the cosmos:' καθὼς ἐμὲ ἀπέστειλας εἰς τὸν κόσμον, καὶ γὰρ ἀπέστειλα αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸν κόσμον (17:15–18). Just as Socrates orders the educated to go down (520C: καταβατέον οὖν ἐν μέρει ἑκάστῳ εἰς τὴν τῶν ἄλλων συνοίκησιν), in a similar way Jesus sends his pupils into the world. Both Plato's and John's enlightenment do not aim at a retreat from this world, but at shedding light on the proper hierarchy of physical and non-physical, spiritual levels within this world. This holds true for John, too, as, after all, this visible cosmos has been created through the true light (1:10).

<sup>68</sup> For this non-elitist self-understanding of Christianity as opposed to the elitism of Greek philosophy, despite similarity in content, see also Origen, *Against Celsus* 7.42–43. Both Justin and Origen demonstrate the difficulty of Greek philosophy by referring to Plato, *Timaeus* 28C: 'Now to discover the Maker and Father of this universe were a task indeed; and having discovered Him, to declare Him unto all men were a thing impossible' (transl. R.G. Bury). Cf. Justin, *Apologies* 2.10 and Origen, *Against Celsus* 7.43. On this use of *Timaeus* 28C, see A.D. Nock, 'The Exegesis of *Timaeus* 28C,' *Vigiliae Christianae* 16 (1962) 79–86. See also Van den Berg, this volume, §3.

<sup>69</sup> See, e.g., Numenius, frg. 60; Plotinus, *Enneads* 4.8.3; and Porphyry, *The Cave of the Nymphs in the Odyssey* 5.1, 6.11–20, and 8.12.

### 3. Conclusion and final observations

John's identification of Christ as the world's true light in the Prologue to his Gospel is part of his conscious modelling of the Prologue on the opening of *Genesis*. Reading about the invisibility of the earth in the Septuagint translation of *Genesis* 1:2 (ἡ δὲ γῆ ἦν ἀόρατος), it seems plausible that John—like Philo and Clement before and after him—took the invisibility of this earth to allude to the non-visible, noetic paradigm which was subsequently implemented in the visible world at its creation. For that reason, John also took the reference to the light in *Genesis* 1:3 as a reference to the invisible, true, real light which preceded the creation of the world's physical light. The concept and terminology of true, real, noetic light was at home in Platonist thought and derives ultimately from *Phaedo* 109E. John introduces this Platonic notion of the true light in his Prologue (1:9) and links it up with Plato's further elaboration on this light as the light which enlightens all in his *Republic* (540A).

As this connection between John and Plato seems to remain unnoticed in modern scholarly literature, it seems relevant to point out that Church fathers such as Origen and Augustine, who were still imbued with the ideas and arguments of classical philosophy, had no difficulty in recognizing it. According to Origen, the Platonic idea that 'a light suddenly arrived in the soul as though kindled by a leaping spark' is contained in John's assertion that Christ, the Logos, is 'the light of men,' which—Origen adds—is 'the true light that lightens every man coming into the true and intelligible world' (*Against Celsus* 6.5).

The same link between the Platonic notion of the true, noetic light and John is present in Origen's polemic against the worship of the heavenly bodies. In this polemic, Origen stresses that it is unreasonable that human beings

should have been amazed at the visible light of the sun, moon and stars (τὸ αἰσθητὸν ἡλίου καὶ σελήνης καὶ ἄστρον φως), to such an extent that because of their visible light they should somehow regard themselves as beneath them and worship them. For they (human beings, that is) possess a great intellectual light of knowledge (τηλικούτον νοητὸν γνώσεως φως) and a 'true light' (φῶς ἀληθινόν; *John* 1:9), and a 'light of the world' (φῶς τοῦ κόσμου; *John* 8:12; 9:5; cf. 11:9), and a 'light of men' (φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων; *John* 1:4). If they ought to worship them, they ought not to do so because of the visible light which amazes the masses (οὐ διὰ τὸ θαυμαζόμενον ὑπὸ τῶν πολλῶν αἰσθητὸν φως), but because of the intellectual and true light (ἀλλὰ διὰ τὸ νοητὸν καὶ ἀληθινόν), supposing

that the stars in heaven are also rational and good beings (...). However, not even their intellectual light ought to be worshipped by anyone who sees and understands the true light (τὸ ἀληθινὸν φῶς) (...). Those who have realized how 'God is light' (1 John 1:5), and who have comprehended how the Son of God is 'the true light, which lightens every man coming into the world' (John 1:9), and have also understood what he meant when he said 'I am the light of the world' (John 8:12), would not reasonably worship the light in the sun, moon and stars which is like a dim spark compared with God who is light of the true light

(*Against Celsus* 5.10–11; transl. H. Chadwick).<sup>70</sup>

In a similar way, Augustine criticizes the inconsistency of those Platonic philosophers who suppose that many gods are to be worshipped. According to Augustine, this is inconsistent because the Platonists themselves agree that 'the soul of man' and the 'immortal and blessed dwellers in heaven' derive their blessedness from the same source,

from a certain intelligible light cast upon them, which is their God, and which is different from themselves, and which illuminates them so that they are enlightened, and may by their participation in it exist in a state of perfect blessedness (*The City of God* 10.1–2; quotation from 10.2).<sup>71</sup>

To demonstrate this basic agreement between him and the Platonists, Augustine points to Plotinus who, in his explanation of Plato, asserts that not even

the soul of the cosmos derives its blessedness from any other source than does our own soul: that is, from the light which is different from it, which created it, and by whose intelligible illumination the soul is intelligibly enlightened (*The City of God* 10.2).<sup>72</sup>

All beings receive their blessed life and 'the light by which the truth is understood' from the same source. 'This,' as Augustine explicitly says, 'is in harmony with the Gospel,' and he goes on to quote the passage from John's Prologue on 'the true light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world' (John 1:9). From this Augustine draws

<sup>70</sup> Cf. also Origen, *Commentary on John* 1.159–161, 164, and 167. On this issue in Origen, see also A. Scott, *Origen and the Life of the Stars: A History of an Idea* (Oxford Early Christian Studies), Oxford 1991, 132–133; and Wallraff, *Christus Verus Sol*, 42, 54–55, 57, 64.

<sup>71</sup> Transl. R.W. Dyson, *Augustine: The City of God Against the Pagans* (Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought), Cambridge 1998.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. Plotinus, *Enneads* 4.7.10, 6.9.4, and 6.9.9. For the continuing influence of this idea in later philosophy, see N. Jolley, *The Light of the Soul: Theories of Ideas in Leibniz, Malebranche, and Descartes*, Oxford 1990.

the conclusion that 'the rational or intellectual soul (...) cannot be its own light, but shines by its participation in another and true light' (*The City of God* 10.2).

Both Origen and Augustine explicitly link the Platonic notion of the 'true light' with John. It is probable, however, that this link is not due to Origen's and Augustine's Greek-philosophical interpretation of John, but to the fact that John himself drew on Platonic philosophy. The high esteem in which Plato was held by contemporary Judaism, even in Galilee as the case of Justus of Tiberias demonstrates, makes this far from unlikely. John seems to have had access to Greek *paideia*. Like Philo, John seems to have taken note of important themes and issues in the allegory of the cave in Plato's *Republic*. This is suggested by the way in which John elaborates the concept of the true light in the body of his Gospel, after he has introduced it in the Gospel's Prologue in which he interprets the light mentioned in *Genesis* 1:3 as the true, archetypal light of the invisible, paradigmatic creation. The dynamics of the light's effulgence and people's receptiveness to the 'true light' and to 'truth' constitute a running theme within John's Gospel.

# The Creation of Heaven and Earth

Re-interpretations of Genesis 1 in the  
Context of Judaism, Ancient Philosophy,  
Christianity, and Modern Physics

*Edited by*

George H. van Kooten



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